

## CHAPTER III

### THE YEAR 187 B.C.: THE CONSULS MARCUS AEMILIUS LEPIDUS AND CAIUS FLAMINIUS DEFEAT THE LIGURIANS AND CONSTRUCT TWO ROADS

- 1 – Consul elections in 187 B.C.: Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Caius Flaminius.
- 2 - Description of Liguria and Ligurian guerrilla warfare.
- 3 - Identification of the battlefields.
- 4 - The battles of Caius Flaminius.
- 5 - The battles of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus.
- 6 - Caius Flaminius builds the Bologna-Arezzo transapennine road.
- 7 - Marcus Aemilius Lepidus constructs the road from Piacenza to Rimini (the Via Aemilia).

#### 1 – Consul elections in 187 B.C.: Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Caius Flaminius.

On 18 February 187 B.C., during the “*comitia*” in Rome, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Caius Flaminius were elected consuls. Livy narrates that<sup>1</sup>: “... *there were rumours of a major war in Liguria which was growing increasingly serious day by day. Therefore, on the day when the new consuls discussed spheres of competence and the state of the Republic, the Senate assigned Liguria to both as their province. This senatus consultum was opposed by the consul Lepidus, who claimed that it was disgraceful that both consuls be confined to the valleys of Liguria... (ceteris omissis). After listening to these protests the Senate remained firm in their decision: Liguria should be the province of both consuls...*”

The dissatisfaction expressed by M. Aemilius Lepidus was due to the usual contempt for the savage Ligurians; their treacherous and loathsome guerrilla warfare did not deserve such effort and their defeat held no glory for the victors. In the past, the Romans

considered the conflict against the Ligurians as straightforward local policing operations, wrongly convinced that they could get rid of these irritating mountain people when and how they wished.

Thus 187 B.C. arrived and after about a decade of clashes, the Ligurians had yet to be finally defeated, mainly because the Romans lacked any real strategy to conquer the Apennines as well as an essential military plan.

However, the Senate recognised the mistake and realised that control of the Tuscan-Emilian–Ligurian Apennines was fundamental for the safety of the Po valley, northern Etruria, Lunigiana and the Ligurian coast. A further alarm bell was sounded by the news that the Apuani Ligurians were carrying out incursions and destroying crops in the recently colonised countryside near Pisa and Bologna. Thus in 187 B.C., in spite of M. Aemilius Lepidus’ opposition, the Senate did not hesitate to assign Liguria to the new consuls as their sole province, and more precisely, the Apennine area between Pisa and Bologna.

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<sup>1</sup> T. Livius: work cited, book XXXVIII, paragraph 42.

## 2 - Description of Liguria and Ligurian guerrilla warfare.

Before narrating the two consuls' military operations in the area, Livy<sup>2</sup> describes the difficulties the Roman legions encountered due to the guerrilla tactics employed by the Ligurians and the impervious nature of the area to conquer: "... *In Liguria there was everything to sharpen the soldier's mettle: mountainous and harsh terrain, positions that were difficult to reach and difficult to clear if the enemy had already secured them; steep narrow roads fraught with the risk of ambush; a nimble and fast-moving enemy, who struck unexpectedly, never allowing them to rest or feel secure anywhere; well fortified positions that had to be stormed with hardship and danger; an impoverished land that forced the soldiers to get by on scant food and offered little hope of plunder. Thus, there were no camp followers, no drawn-out lines of pack animals bringing up the rear. There was nothing but arms, just arms, and people who placed all their hope in them. There was never any lack of opportunity to fight the enemy, because they were so poor that they had to raid their neighbours' fields, but they never got involved in decisive battles*"<sup>3</sup>.

The lack of pack animals in the rearguard indicates there was no expectation of any spoils (which would have required pack animals). These pack animals often belonged to civilians and merchants who followed armies at a distance, ready to trade any form of plunder for money. This was highly appreciated by the commanders, because by immediately converting their plunder into cash, they avoided having to drag it around with them during the war.

We believe that the imaginative description of the Mugello by the Tuscan historian, P. Lino Chini<sup>4</sup> depicts what the area probably looked like at the time: "... *suddenly, as if in a large highly polished mirror, I see the Mugello become a deserted valley encumbered with horror and fearful silence. Its castles, churches, villages and farmhouses have disappeared, completely dissipated;*

*its beautiful cultivated vineyards, lush fields, pretty roads, pleasant banks, shaded avenues...are no more; and in their place there is thick black undergrowth, a deep lake in the middle with wild eagles, hawks and crows circling in the air above, violently shaking their feathers while ruinous rivers descend from the mountains troubling and agitating with raucous ferment the lowland moor. I look around me and see the highest mountain peaks covered in snow and ice, and on the lower hillocks that slope down to the valley there are clearings near rough and humble huts. Herds of buffalo and cows wander around the huts along with few and hard to come by figures, who look more like wild beasts than men, their loins covered by shaggy furs; they have rough hair, a sinister look and a ferocious countenance. Thus the Mugello appeared to me in that ideal vision, and this is the picture that has remained so fixed in my memory that still, after 18 years, I can still see it in my mind and it is always before me. Call it as you wish, a poetic vision, a fantastic dream or something similar; I am certain that my description is very close to the truth, and that at the time of the Magelli Ligurians, the appearance and conditions of our land was even worse than how I imagined and described it".*

## 3 - Identification of the battlefields

Although Livy's account provides an accurate description of the nature of the territory the two consuls attempted to conquer, it is not as exhaustive and exact in pinpointing the location of the battles.

He fails to mention from where the two armies departed and on which fronts they attacked the enemy.

The only Ligurians mentioned are the Friniates and the Apuani.

The only geographical quotes are:

- the countryside near Pisa and Bologna;
- mounts Auginus, Balestra and Suismontium.

Therefore, the only scant references we have to reconstruct the whereabouts of the legions are the general movements mentioned by Livy and our own topographical knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> T. Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 1.

<sup>3</sup> We recognised incredible similarities between this description of the Apennines inhabited by the Ligurians and the sites we explored on the border between Tuscany and Emilia, north and south of the Futa pass.

<sup>4</sup> P. Lino Chini: "Storia antica e moderna del Mugello". Book I, page 55.



*The sign indicating the tourist location Pian di Balestra on the slopes of mount Bastione.*

It is not possible to resort to other annalists, because there are no other historical references about the topic.

Therefore, we must attempt to identify the locations occupied by the enemy that the two consuls had to fight.

The Friniate Ligurians, settled on the eastern slopes of the Apennines, in the valleys near Modena and Reggio Emilia, and they very probably settled in the upper valley of the river Reno near Bologna.

The Apuani were the most numerous and bellicose Ligurians<sup>5</sup>, and occupied the western side of the Tuscan-Ligurian Apennines: the Apuani Alps, Garfagnana and Lunigiana.

They had also spread from their homelands towards the Pistoia Apennines, probably forming alliances with the Friniate tribes.

Without doubt, the Mugello was the theatre of war, considering the battles were fought in the area between Pisa and Bologna and that one battle took place on mount Balestra, not far north of the Futa pass. In spite of this, no memory remains of any autonomous belligerence by the *Mucelli* (the inhabitants of the area), otherwise we believe that Livy would have mentioned them, just as he mentioned the other tribes involved in the fight. Furthermore, the Mucelli are not mentioned in any of the other Roman campaigns against the Ligurians before or after 187 B.C. Therefore, we can presume that they were only moderately important from a demographic and military point of view.

Perhaps when the Romans were about to attack their land, the Mucelli requested and were granted the protection of the Apuani, who according to the account of this conflict, took command of operations with the Friniates.

#### **4 - The battles of Caius Flaminius.**

Titus Livius first mentions the battles of C. Flaminius, and then those of M. Aemilius Lepidus. However, the two consuls probably agreed to start their military operations at the same time to prevent the escape of the retreating enemy, as occurred during previous wars.

As for the Pisa - Bononia axis, they not only had to win the battles but they also had to win this area of the Apennines once and for all.

Livy starts his description of the battles fought by C. Flaminius as follows<sup>6</sup>: "... After several successful battles against the Ligurian Friniates, the consul, C. Flaminius, accepted their surrender and disarmed them. However, because he had to use force due to their reluctance to surrender their arms, they abandoned their villages and sought refuge on mount Auginus<sup>7</sup>. The consul followed them in close pursuit, but because they were mainly disarmed, they scattered again

<sup>5</sup> Every war fought against the Ligurians by the Romans before and after 187 B.C. was mainly against the Apuani.

<sup>6</sup> Titus Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2.

<sup>7</sup> This mountain cannot be located because there is no place name that can be derived from it in the Modena, Reggio Emilia or Bologna Apennines.

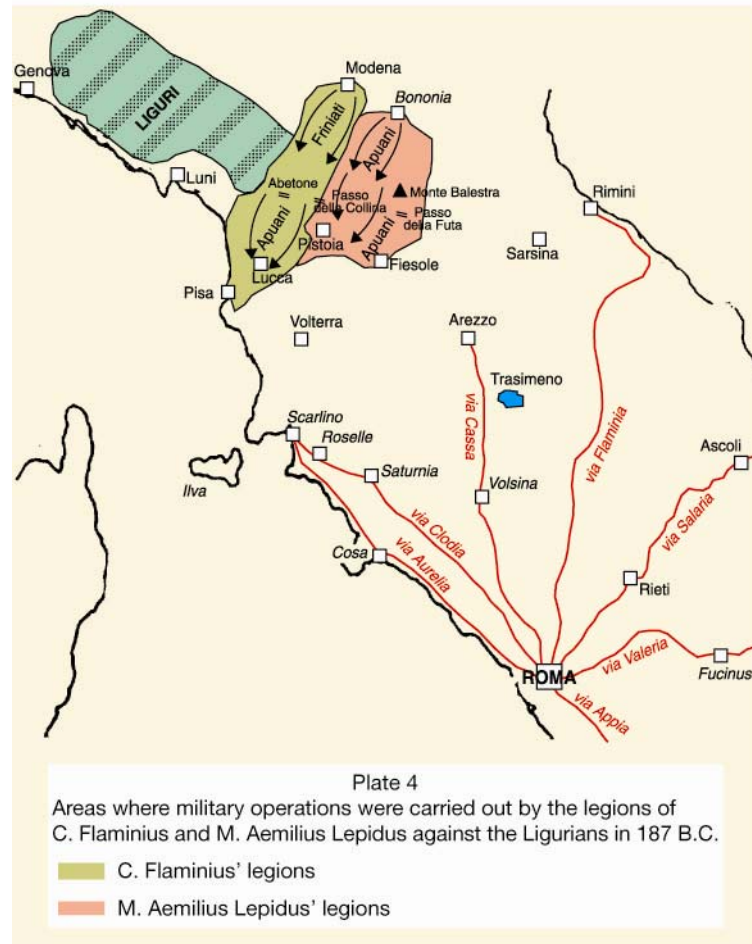


fleeing headlong over impracticable terrain and rugged rocks, inaccessible to the enemy. From here, they escaped over the Apennines. Those who had remained in their camp were surrounded and overwhelmed. The legions were then led across the Apennines. The Ligurians were able to hold out for a while thanks to the mountain height they had seized, but they soon surrendered. A more thorough search for weapons was carried out and they were totally disarmed.

It is likely that the two consuls joined forces near Bologna<sup>8</sup> and set out from this recently established Latin colony on two parallel fronts: M. Aemilius Lepidus towards the Bolognese Apennines, C. Flaminius towards Modena and Reggio. Considering that no one knows where mount Auginus is located, the exact movements of C. Flaminius cannot be pinpointed. However, he pursued the fleeing enemies across the Apennine range; they may have ended up near Pavullo, Sestola, Abetone or, beyond the Apennines, near Castelnuovo Garfagnana, Barga, Bagni di Lucca and S. Marcello Pistoiese.

The consul then moved his legions across the Apennines in an attempt to capture the Friniates who had scattered in the Tuscan valleys, but he was unable to take them all prisoner. In fact, M. Aemilius had to complete the task of rounding up the escaping Friniates in Tuscany. By now, the consul Flaminius and his legions had reached the western side of the Apennines. They then descended into Tuscany along the valleys of the Serchio, Garfagnana and Pistoia. Here they fought the Apuani Ligurians who had a powerful stronghold in the area and who had carried out skirmishes and plundered the Pisa countryside.

Titus Livius continues<sup>9</sup>: "... war was then waged against the Apuani Ligurians, who had devastated the farmlands of Pisa and Bologna to such an extent that any cultivation of the soil was impossible. Once the Apuani were also vanquished, the consul made peace with the neighbouring peoples.



Therefore, once Caius Flaminius had completed his expedition and defeated the Apuani in Tuscany, he restored peace in the area. He then must have re-crossed the Apennines and returned to Bologna (if it is true that, after a period of rest, he started to build a road from Bologna to Arezzo).

## 5 - The battles of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus.

We believe it is very probable that M. Aemilius Lepidus assembled his troops in Bologna and from here, launched his attack against the Apuani Ligurians who had occupied the Apennines near the upper valley of the rivers

<sup>8</sup> We shall later see that at the end of this war, the two consuls probably met up again in Bologna.

<sup>9</sup> Titus Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2: by referring to the countryside around Pisa and Bologna, Livy evidently wanted to indicate the outer limits of the large area between the two important cities of the time, where the Apuani carried out their plundering. The fact that he does not mention Fiesole may mean that it was not affected by the incursions because firmly in the hands of the Roman garrisons.



Savena, Setta and Reno. Once they had sacked and devastated the area around Bologna<sup>10</sup>, the Ligurians could only have withdrawn towards the Collina pass, along the valley of the Reno and towards the Futa pass, probably along the existing and very ancient track from Bologna to the Mugello, along the ridge to the left of the river Savena. Then, after pursuing the enemy over the mountain passes and through the Pistoia and Mugello valleys, the consul defeated the Apuani and the Friniates who had escaped Flaminius and restored peace in the area (which at the time was inhabited by Ligurians). We must return to Livy to locate the battles fought by M. Aemilius Lepidus: "... *The other consul, M. Aemilius sacked and burned the villages of the Ligurians in the plains and the valleys, whose inhabitants had sought refuge on mounts Balestra and Suismontium*<sup>11</sup>. He then attacked the men who had sought refuge on the mountains, first he harassed them with light skirmishes, forcing them to descend to the plain where he engaged and defeated them in a regular battle. During the battle, he vowed a temple to Diana.

*Now that he had subjugated the tribes on this side of the Apennines, Aemilius advanced against those on the other side of the range, including the Friniates that C. Flaminius had not reached. He defeated them all, disarmed them and forced the entire population to move from the mountains to the plains. After establishing peace in Liguria, he led his army into Gaul*".

There are two cornerstones to our interpretation:

- 1) mount Balestra, the refuge and stronghold of the Apuani appears in modern cartography under the name of mount Bastione, but was indicated as mount Balestra in previous centuries. Mount Balestra stands on the border between Tuscany and Emilia, on the uphill ridge across the Apennines, 8.5 kilometres north of the Futa pass, on the watershed between the rivers Setta and Savena, between the municipalities of S. Benedetto Val di Sambro and Firenzuola. The old place name lives on in "Pian di Balestra" a flat area near the peak<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, the mountain Livy calls "Suismontium" has never been located. It stood near mount Balestra, and was the second refuge of the Ligurians who escaped during the same attack by M. Aemilius Lepidus.
- 2) From Livy's words that M. Aemilius Lepidus, "*had now subjugated the tribes on this side of the Apennines, Aemilius advanced against those on the other side of the range, including the Friniates that C. Flaminius had not reached*" it is possible to deduce that:
  - a) this confirms our localisation of mount Balestra as being the area he occupied on this side of the Apennines, that is on the Bolognese side;
  - b) only after this conquest did he "*advance against those* (the Apuani and Mucelli) *on the other side of the range*", that is on the other side of the Futa pass, in the valley of the Mugello and beyond the Collina pass in the valleys of Pistoia, probably where

<sup>10</sup> Titus Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2: "... war was then waged against the Apuani Ligurians, who had devastated the farmlands of Pisa and Bologna to such an extent that cultivation was impossible".

<sup>11</sup> Titus Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2 "... M. Aemilius, alter consul agros Ligurum, vicosque qui in campis aut vallibus erant ipsis montes duos Ballistam Suismontiumque tenentibus deussit depopulatusque est...".

<sup>12</sup> We do not agree with the theory formulated by a number of contemporary historians, which locates the mount Balestra mentioned by Livy in these circumstances of war in the Apennines of Reggio Emilia, on the border with present-day Liguria. Here, Livy is referring to the battle fought in 187 B.C. against the Apuani who had made incursions into Bolognese territory; therefore, he is referring to the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines and not the Emilian-Ligurian Apennines. In the context of these battles, it was the other consul, (C. Flaminius) who entered the territory of Modena and Reggio to defeat the Friniates; if Livy had mentioned mount Balestra in reference to the battles fought by C. Flaminius, one could theorise that while pursuing the Friniates in their flight to the mountains of Reggio Emilia and Liguria, he would have reached the mount Balestra mentioned by Livy in the context of another war. In book XL, paragraph 41 Livy mentions (with reference to the wars against the Ligurians), a mount "Ballistam" which some locate at the source of the river Secchia, near the Cerreto pass, bordering with the present-day Liguria; however, these events took place in 180 B.C., in a temporal, territorial and war context that has nothing to do with the battles fought by M. Aemilius Lepidus. In fact, it was the consuls, A Postumius and Q. Fulvius, who fought against the Ligurians north of the river Magra; Livy tells that the former occupied mounts Ballistam and Leto, blocking the enemy's road and starving them into submission; it is obvious that this mount Ballistam cannot be the same mentioned by Livy in the wars of seven years earlier, not to mention that the mount mentioned by Livy was mentioned together with mount Suismontium and this mount is mentioned with mount Leto. Therefore, it appears logical to suppose that these two mountains had the same name but were located in different places.

the Friniate Ligurians sought refuge from Flaminius when he cleared the adjacent area.

Titus Livius ends by pointing out that Marcus Aemilius Lepidus “*subdued everybody*”, that is the Apuani, Mucelli (who had probably formed an alliance with the Apuani), and the survivors of the Friniate tribes. Then “*after establishing peace in Liguria*<sup>13</sup>, he led his army into Gaul”, that is, he returned to Bologna.

To summarise, the legions of the two consuls met in Bologna and started the war against the Ligurians on two adjoining fronts moving in the same direction: C. Flaminius fought against the Friniate in the valleys and Apennines of Modena, and M. Aemilius Lepidus (on C. Flaminius’ left) fought against the Apuani in the valleys and Apennines of Bologna.

Both then continued the offensive beyond the Apennines along the routes they were responsible for and, after bringing peace to the area, returned victorious to Bologna.

Thus after completing the belligerent phase of their mandate from the Senate, the consuls now had to consolidate their victory by constructing roads. These roads were to act as a long-lasting reminder to the bellicose Ligurians who continued to inhabit the neighbouring provinces, that Rome was not going to tolerate any more incursions.

In spite of this, the Romans had to continue fighting against the Ligurians for a further twenty years; the Apuani Ligurians were only completely subdued in 180 B.C. following their mass deportation <sup>14</sup>.

## 6 - Caius Flaminius builds the Bologna-Arezzo transapennine road.

After first defeating the Friniate Ligurians on the Modena Apennines, and then the Apuani Ligurians on the other side of the Apennines and bringing peace to the area, C. Flaminius returned to Bologna where he joined up with the legions of M. Aemilius Lepidus<sup>15</sup>. At this point, Livy adds<sup>16</sup>: “... And now that the province was brought from a state of war into one of peace, he built a road from Bononia to Arretium to ensure his men were not kept idle”.

This is the only mention of the construction of the Bologna to Arezzo road in the Latin annals. This sole mention of the road and its probable brief use, misled (and was unfortunately misunderstood from then on), the historian Strabo (born in Greece in 64 B.C. and who lived in Rome during the age of Augustus <sup>17</sup>). Strabo not only ignored its existence but also confused the father, Gaius Flaminius, with the son, Caius Flaminius, attributing to the son the construction of the Via Flaminia between Rome and Rimini, which instead was built in 220 B.C. by Gaius (the father, who died during the battle of Lake Trasimeno against Hannibal in 217 B.C.)

Strabo’s obvious error created an interpretational conflict among scholars that it was still a cause for discussion even at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Bolognese historian, Ludovico Savioli <sup>18</sup>, mentions this divergence by pointing out that Caius Flaminius must have constructed a road

<sup>13</sup> Here Titus Livius refers to the Tuscan valleys occupied by M. Aemilius Lepidus and which at the time were part of Liguria.

<sup>14</sup> Titus Livius: work cited, book XL, paragraph 38: “*The Ligurians had not been expecting a war before the arrival of the consuls in the province and they were taken by surprise and some 12,000 surrendered. Cornelius and Baebius, who had first consulted the Senate on the matter by letter, decided to bring these down from their mountains onto the plains, far from their homes. Their purpose was to deprive them of any hope of returning; for they were convinced that this was the only way of ending the Ligurian War. The Romans possessed an area of public land in Samnite territory that had formerly been the property of the Taurasini. This was where the consuls wished to relocate the Apuani Ligurians, and so they issued an order for them to come down from the mountains with their wives and children, and bring with them all their possessions... (ceteris omissis). Some forty thousand people, including women and children were relocated at public expense*”.

<sup>15</sup> From Livy’s account, it can be understood that this meeting took place on Bolognese territory: in fact, Flaminius started to build the road from Bologna and as concerns M. Aemilius Lepidus, Livy clearly states that he returned to the land of the Gauls.

<sup>16</sup> T. Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2.

<sup>17</sup> Strabo: “Geography” “Italy”, book V, paragraph 11: “... in fact, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Gaius Flaminius shared the same consulship. After defeating the Ligurians, the latter built the Via Flaminia from Rome through Tyrrhenia and Umbria as far as the outskirts of Ariminum...”

<sup>18</sup> Ludovico Savioli was born in 1729 and died in 1804.

linking Etruria to Bologna, in the land of the Apuani Ligurians he had defeated<sup>19</sup>.

We do not believe Caius Flaminius built the road just because it was a way of keeping his men busy with hard work, and to ensure they were not left idle. We have already mentioned that it was part of Roman strategy to build roads through conquered lands, that the Ligurians carried out repeated incursions in the same areas and that the Senate decided to keep these newly colonised provinces under firm control.

Therefore, it was this key requirement that pushed C. Flaminius to build the road as ordered by the Senate. That this was part of an essential strategic plan is proved by the fact that M. Aemilius Lepidus built the Via Aemilia at the same time.

It is also necessary to point out that C. Flaminius could only have started the building work, because the time available during this first consulship was extremely limited.

A reconstruction of his movements in 187 B.C. suggests the following chronology:

- February: elected consul;
- March-April: the army gathers near Bologna and prepares for war;
- May-June: battles against the Friniates;
- July-August: battles against the Apuani in Etruria;
- September: return to Bologna and a period of rest;
- October: road building starts;
- December: consulship expires.

The length of the route (approximately 180 km) and the contingent logistical difficulties in constructing a road on the Apennines (including at high quotas) implies that the teams of legionaries and prisoners must have

worked for at least a few years<sup>20</sup>. This plurennial commitment is indirectly confirmed by the events of the following year. Livy specifies<sup>21</sup> that the two consuls nominated for the year 186 B.C., and that is, Quintus Marcius and Spurius Postumius: “took command of the army led the previous year by the consuls C. Flaminius and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus; a *senatus consultum* instructed them to recruit two new legions... (ceteris omissis)... on completion of the investigations<sup>22</sup> Quintus Marcius set out first, heading for the Apuani Ligurians”.

Recruitment of two new legions was necessary to restore forces after the human losses suffered during the wars waged by C. Flaminius and M. Aemilius Lepidus, but was probably also necessary to replace the soldiers employed in the construction of the two roads that had just been started. In fact, the legionaries not only had to superintend the work, but also protect the construction sites to prevent the prisoners forced to build the roads from escaping. They also had to defend the area from attacks by the Ligurians who had yet to be completely defeated.

## **7 - Marcus Aemilius Lepidus constructs the road from Piacenza to Rimini (the Via Aemilia).**

Livy concludes his account of the 187 B.C. Roman-Ligurian wars with these words <sup>23</sup>: “... after establishing peace in Liguria, he (M. Aemilius Lepidus) led his army to Gaul and built a road from Piacenza to Rimini to join the Via Flaminia”. In the last pitched battle against the Ligurians, he made a vow of a temple to Queen Juno. Such was the military campaign carried out in that year in Liguria...”

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<sup>19</sup> Ludovico Savioli: “Annali Bolognesi dall’anno di Roma 363 to 1274”, page 18: “It must be said that Strabo was wrong because he does not concur with Livy. And I know that Strabo’s defenders will question this but the road from Bologna to Arezzo mentioned by Livy, was needed by the Romans to allow them fast communication between Etruria and Bologna due to the defeated Apuani”.

<sup>20</sup> The work was demanding although (as we shall see later) Flaminius probably just improved and widened a road that had existed since the dawn of history.

<sup>21</sup> T. Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 20.

<sup>22</sup> The investigations regarded the Bacchanal.

<sup>23</sup> T. Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2.



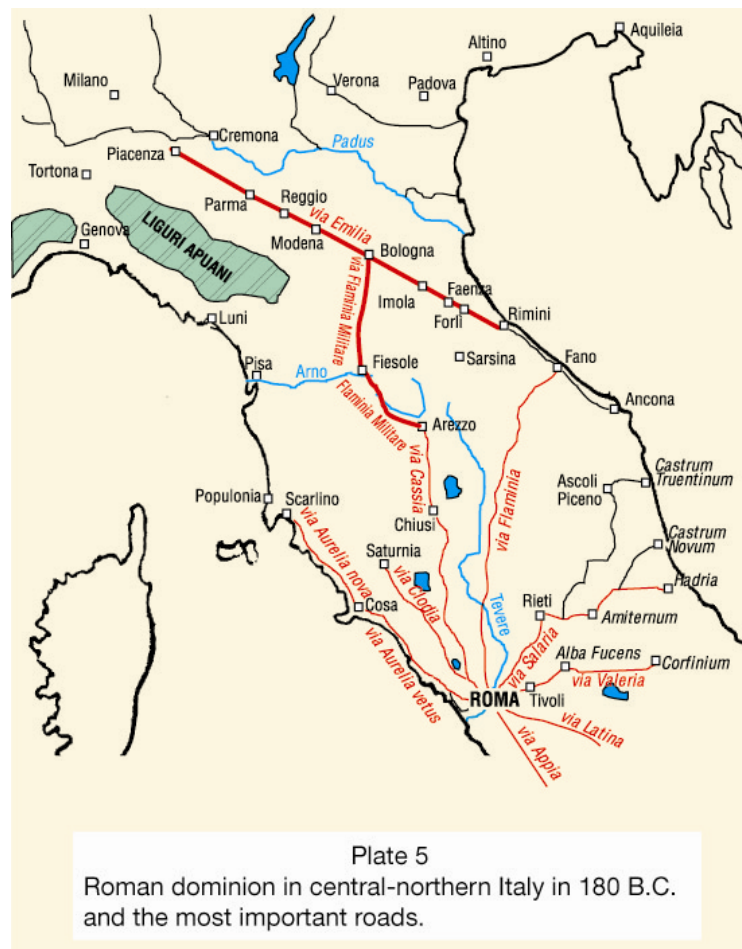
Therefore, Aemilius Lepidus completed road construction in the areas where peace had been achieved, finally linking the ancient colony of Piacenza (founded in 218 B.C.) to Rimini; from here it was possible to reach Rome along the existing Via Flaminia. Thus, Roman dominion was finally consolidated throughout Cisalpine Gaul.

If it is true that M. Aemilius Lepidus selected the route and began to construct this great artery (the Via Aemilia, named after him), it is also true that it took many years to complete (work apparently continued until 175 B.C.) Twelve years is a reasonable amount of time considering the work needed to consolidate the areas of marshland, as well as the construction of bridges to span the numerous rivers that flow down from the Apennines.

While building the road, the Romans founded other colonies along the route:

- Parma and Modena (*Mutina*) in 183 B.C., the first two colonies of Roman citizens;
- Reggio Emilia, during M. Aemilius Lepidus' second consulship, and after whom it was named (*Regium Lepidum*).

Then during the course of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C., many other urban centres were established along this great thoroughfare, which all prospered thanks to lucrative trade links: Fidenza (*Fidentia*), Castelfranco Emilia (*Forum Gallorum*), Claterna, Imola (*Forum Cornelii*), Faenza (*Faventia*) (already Roman in 225 B.C.), Forlì (*Forum Livii*) and Cesena (*Caesena*).



## **PART TWO**

### **THE CONDITIONS POSED BY RIVERS AND MOUNTAIN RIDGES ON THE APENNINE ROAD SYSTEM**





## INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

Thanks to our articulated and vast modern road system, we often forget the existence of mountain ranges and waterways, all conquered by impressive works of engineering. Very rarely do we feel the force of nature, only when communications are interrupted by widespread floods, sudden landslides or heavy snowfalls<sup>1</sup>.

However, in ancient times, travellers encountered numerous difficulties, especially along mountain itineraries, where landslides or rivers could constitute impassable obstacles.

This is why routes along mountain ridges were preferred; there were fewer risks of landslides and rock falls, no rivers to cross; orienteering was easier and the distance to cover was shorter<sup>2</sup>.

Obviously, this was the case when the ridge headed in the desired direction. Otherwise, the traveller had to tackle alternative routes, exploiting the opportunities offered by nature, never going against nature and always trying to find the shortest and easiest route. Often long diversions were necessary, sometimes to overcome natural obstacles, at other times

to avoid hostile communities or excessively expensive tolls.

For centuries these problems afflicted travellers whether on foot or horseback (and more often than not by mule). After the fall of the Roman Empire, and up to 1762<sup>3</sup>, it was impossible to travel over the Apennines from Bologna to Florence by carriage, cart or gig<sup>4</sup>.

Before starting our explorations, we studied the hydro-geological configuration of the Bolognese versant of the Apennines. We particularly dwelled upon the transport problems of past centuries to get an idea of how different travel was in the past compared to the present-day.

We also identified a number of medieval routes, which were “secondary” compared to other long-distance routes, without forgetting the four Apennine passes used in different epochs to link Bologna to Florence.

We believe it is important to take a preliminary look at these factors, because they give a clear idea of the precarious conditions of the transapennine road system in the Middle Ages and demonstrate that the massive road structure we unearthed could not have belonged to this epoch.

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<sup>1</sup> Just consider that at times, all Bologna-Florence road traffic can become completely jammed due to snowfalls and icy stretches.

<sup>2</sup> When a route unwinds around the side of a mountain, it is always longer than the route over the mountaintop (so long as the mountain is not excessively high), even if the routes are parallel, because it must follow the curves of the slopes.

<sup>3</sup> In 1762, the first carriage road from Bologna to Florence was opened through the Raticosa and Futa passes.

<sup>4</sup> Arturo Palmieri has the following to say about this (“La montagna bolognese del Medio Evo” Published by Arnaldo Forni, 1981, pages. 326-327): “However, goods and people could only be transported by pack animal (ceteris omissis). Travel by carriage was not even in use when Girolamo Ranuzzi (1870) dictated the work standards of the spa in Porretta. These standards establish prices for the carriage of people on horseback and sedan chairs.



## CHAPTER IV

# FOR CENTURIES THE HYDRO-GEOGRAPHICAL FAN ON THE BOLOGNESE APENNINES HINDERED THE ROAD SYSTEM

### 1 - Watercourses.

### 2 - The centuries-old difficulty in crossing rivers and torrents and the disasters caused by water.

### 1 - Watercourses.

If you look at a physical map of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, you will notice that a series of rivers and torrents fan out from the mountain range (including the Futa massif, the Sasso di Castro, mount Freddi, mount Oggioli and mount Canda) which cover various distances to reach the Po Valley<sup>1</sup>.

The Futa Pass is the source of the two main watercourses: the Gambellato to the west and the Santerno to the east.

The Gambellato torrent joins the Setta at Castiglione dei Pepoli; at Sasso Marconi, it joins the Reno and a few kilometres after Casalecchio, it intersects the Via Aemilia. Although the course of this first torrent is brief, it collects the water of a vast deep valley, crowned by a series of peaks that, starting with mount Bastione to the east, continues southwards with mount Luario, Poggiaccio and Poggio Castelluccio as far as Futa; here the peaks head left with Poggio della Mandria. These peaks all form a watershed between Bologna and Florence. Instead, the source of the Santerno is on the eastern side of the Futa pass. This river also collects the water of a large basin (enclosed by a circle of mountains) that runs from north to south from

Gioigo di Scarperia (882 m above sea level) to Tre Poggioli (966 m above sea level) with a diameter as the crow flies of approximately 15 km; the east-west axis goes from mount Banditacce (1202 m above sea level) to Monte del Fabbro (986 m above sea level); the diameter along this line is also some 15 km. Therefore, the upper basin of the Santerno, near Firenzuola measures almost 180 square kilometres with a consistent water flow rate even during the summer, due to the numerous streams that flow into it. Unlike the other rivers and torrents that flow down from the Apennine watershed towards the north-northeast, the Santerno swiftly descends from Castro S. Martino and Cornacchiaia until it meets the torrent Rovigo in the east until it too, turns towards the northeast. After the upland plain of the characteristic town of Firenzuola<sup>2</sup>, its meanders sink and the water has eroded the rock to reveal spectacular layers of sandstone alternated by layers of marl, the water level then rises where the two main torrents meet: the Rovigo on the right and the Diaterna on the left further downstream. After about thirty kilometres, the Santerno flows through Castel del Rio. After this very beautiful town<sup>3</sup>, the valley gradually widens and the steep, almost vertical slopes are replaced by less harsh terrain; from the pointed mountain peaks, the Santerno descends to the hills as far as the

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars inappropriately describe the descent of these watercourses as “comb-like”.

<sup>2</sup> At this point, the valley is so wide and flat that according to local folk tales, in ancient times, before the torrent was brought under control, it often flooded forming large marshes, which were difficult to cross.

<sup>3</sup> Once the dominion of the Alidosi family.





The orography of the Bolognese Apennines highlights a ridge from Bologna to the Futa pass, which includes the source of the Santerno. It flows through a large basin facing northeast which interrupts the other ridges, thus preventing them from reaching the Tuscan-Emilian watershed.



plain, intersecting the Via Aemilia to the east of Imola after a course of almost 60 km. Therefore, the courses of the Gambellato (then Setta and Reno) and the Santerno, start from a single peak, forming the two sides of a large triangle whose base is about 40 km long and which can ideally be considered as along the Imola-Bologna axis (Borgo Panigale).

A series of torrents descend within this area, and eventually intersect the Via Aemilia, the boundary between the flood plain and the retreating mountain slopes.

The Savena is the largest of these torrents; its source is at Poggio di Savena (1116 m above sea level) near the Futa pass. It competes with the Santerno for water from the peak of Sasso di Castro and with the Gambellato for water from the peak of Banditacce. Its waters descend directly northwards as far as the suburbs of Bologna and intersect the Via Aemilia at S. Lazzaro di Savena after about 46 km. The Savena flows through the bottom of a narrow valley and it is flanked by very steep mountainsides. There is another bottleneck downstream of Monterumici, the so-called “Gole di Scascoli”; its course near mount Adone, between mounts Castellazzo and Livergnano is equally narrow. Since ancient times, these inaccessible cliffs have prevented a route through the valley bottom, forcing traffic to run along the nearby ridges<sup>4</sup>. The route that unwinds to the left has been used during every age, as we will be pointing out in the following chapters.

The source of the river Zena is near the Futa trunk road 65, southeast of Loiano, at 800 m above sea level. The Zena flows along a tortuous course through a narrow valley flanked by mounts Livergnano and Monte delle Formiche. The roads through this valley are narrow with numerous hairpin bends and are often damaged by rock falls. The Zena does not reach the Via Aemilia because it flows into the Idice at Pizzocalvo.

The source of the river Idice is at the Raticosa pass, where the Futa trunk road meets the provincial road from Piancaldoli. The ridge on its right starts

on the slopes of mount Canda and is subject to landslides. It continues as far as the Sillaro watershed and then descends from Tre Poggioli, Sasso della Mantasca and Spedaletto (all on the border with Tuscany). As far as Casoni di Romagna, the hill has been depleted by landslides and erosion, revealing ophiolites such as Sasso di S. Zenobi and Sasso della Mantasca. On the left versant, the sandstones of the “Macigno di Monghidoro”<sup>5</sup>



*Sasso di S. Zenobi (900 m above sea level): an ophiolite of volcanic origin, 3 km northeast of the Raticosa pass.*



*Sasso della Mantasca (826 m above sea level): also of volcanic origin, Sasso della Mantasca stands at the start of the watershed between the river Idice and Sillaro.*

<sup>4</sup> The present-day road on the bottom of the Savena valley was opened to traffic during the last decade of this century, following fifty years of contrast and discussion, of work started and then suspended, of ruinous floods, which - inevitably - tore away long stretches of the road bed, creating considerable havoc for local traffic. Only decisive intervention by the Bologna Provincial Government ensured that a convenient road was built at the bottom of the valley.

<sup>5</sup> These layers of sandstone are called “macigni” and are part of the sandstone-marl flysch known in geology as *Monghidoro formation*, dating back to the Palaeocene-Cretaceous, some seventy million years ago.

are more resistant to erosion, and the downward slope is harsher and steeper. At Bisano, the valley narrows and, on the left, mount Bibeles, with the famous Celtic village on its peak, stands guard over the valley of the Idice and the Zena. The valley remains narrow until after Mercatale where it opens out onto the plain. At Pizzocalvo it receives the waters of the Zena and, after about 40 km, intersects the Via Aemilia.

The source of the torrent Quaderna starts from the peak of Castelvechio, between mount Calderolo and mount Armato. Its route through the hills is brief and most of its basin features erosion furrows and is subject to landslides; it crosses the Via Aemilia between Maggio and Osteria Grande, after a distance of 12 km.

The source of the Sillaro starts on the peak of Tre Poggioli, and flows north-northeast towards the plain.

The basin of the Sillaro consists in scaly clay featuring jagged and serrated erosion furrows, corroded by the weather and landslides. The upper part of this valley is in the province of Florence and includes the picturesque village of Piancaldoli. After about 35 km, the Sillaro intersects the Via Aemilia at Castel S. Pietro.



*The gravel road that unwinds along the ridge of the watershed between the Idice and the Sillaro, along the stretch south of Casoni di Romagna. The road is forced to follow the tortuous bends around the frequent subsidence of the erosion furrows in an utterly treeless landscape.*

The Sallustra flows between the Sillaro and the Santerno; its source is in Gesso, on mount La Pieve. The nature of the terrain in its basin is not unlike that of the nearby Sillaro; it flows for about 20 km from its source to the Via Aemilia.

This brief description of the watercourses and ridges that descend along the Emilia versant of the great Apennine backbone, underlines that the most important rivers and ridges start from just two passes, the Futa and the Raticosa. The Gambellato, Savena and Santerno start at the Futa pass whereas the Idice and Sillaro start at the Raticosa pass.

Two corresponding parallel ridges also start from the same two passes, but each ridge features a fundamental difference: while there is a gradual descent from the Futa pass to the Mugello valley, the same cannot be said for the Raticosa pass. In fact, the vast and deep depression of Firenzuola opens out south of the Raticosa. Here, anyone wanting to cross the Apennine range is forced to descend and then re-ascend to the Giogo pass.

## **2 - The centuries-old difficulty in crossing rivers and torrents and the disasters caused by water.**

All these watercourses, fed by streams, ditches and torrents pose a threat when there are heavy rainfalls.

During these weather conditions, drivers crossing the bridges on the Via Aemilia over the rivers and torrents that flow down from the Apennines can see how the menacing swollen waters invade the river banks, dragging huge tree trunks and all sorts of things downstream (even animals). It is also common to read reports about people on the riverbed surprised by flash floods. Our ancestors tell of men overcome and drowned in their attempt to reach the other side of rivers, adventurous fords, leaps that would nowadays win an Olympic medal and miraculous rescues immortalised by epigraphs such as the one commemorating the inauguration of the bridge at Alberaccio, below Cornacchiaia:

*“Virgin Mary, you have saved so many from the dangers of the waters in the ford across this river for so many years  
Grateful we place this sacred reminder on the bridge constructed in the year MCMXIII so that our grandchildren will know of your Grace”.*

The bridge over the Diaterna, a left affluent of the Santerno, was built in the eighteenth century by Grand Duke Leopold, thanks to the interest shown by Cardinal Martini who was shocked by the number of accidents and deaths by drowning caused



in the attempt to ford the swollen torrent<sup>6</sup>.

Some place names in the Apennines still have the name of "guado" [ford] or originate from the word (for example, Vado). A ford is a stretch of river where the riverbed widens and the water almost flows at ground level; therefore, the river is less deep and flows less fast. It was where the tracks or paths to farms and villages crossed from one side of the river to the other. A rope was stretched from one side to the other of important fords. There were usually buildings built very close to the river as well as other constructions, such as mills. In the dry season, the inhabitants removed any large rocks from the ford and filled whirlpools so that pack animals could also get across. The people who lived near fords often built long ladders. They tied a rope to one end, raised the ladder and then lowered it, ensuring it rested on a rock or outcrop; people could then crawl across the ladder. When the ladder was no longer needed, they recovered it to ensure it was not dragged away by the current.

However, a ford is not the same as a bridge, and however convenient the route of a road may be, it cannot be considered a proper road if there are no bridges over the rivers. Safer than the ford and the ladder expedient, was the footbridge (still found along mountain footpaths). A footbridge consists in two parallel beams laid across a river from one bank to another, resting on natural rock or two abutments made using large, dry laid rocks. A series of planks is nailed to the beams and a rope acts as a handrail. However, the problem with this type of bridge is that it cannot be used by animals.

Bridges across rivers were always entirely or almost entirely made of wood and were located in the most important crossing points for local traffic. Guidotti<sup>7</sup> made a list of bridges, but because these were wooden bridges, they quickly fell into ruin, almost

always destroyed by floods. If a bridge was solid, perhaps made of masonry, it lasted longer. However, these bridges were subject to every kind of toll and levy such as the bridge over the Savena, which, at the end of 1700, cost one *Paolo*<sup>8</sup> for a seat with two wheels<sup>9</sup>.

Exceptional downpours have always caused disasters, especially in the past. From the newspapers of the time, one learns of the flood on 6 November 1864<sup>10</sup>: "*The streams became rivers, flooding everywhere, dragging footbridges, mills, charcoal kilns and farms downstream*". When rivers overflow from their beds, they erode their banks; this upsets the balance between the base and the side of the mountain and causes landslides. The gradient is steeper along the upper part of watercourses, therefore a great quantity of rocks are transported downstream; as they roll along the bed of the river, they erode and consequently lower the riverbed.

The abundant and continuous rain that fell in 1951 over the entire Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, and the subsequent floods, created numerous landslides, blocking roads and causing houses to collapse. One of the most dramatic events took place at Castel dell'Alpi; during the flood, the bed of the Savena was lowered by about ten metres where the river flows through the town. Just below the peak of Monte dei Cucchi, over thirty million cubic metres of material started to move. The material blocked the course of the Savena and the riverbed was raised by 25 metres, creating the present-day lake. There were no casualties, but a number of houses, scattered on the slopes of the mountain, a small hamlet, "La Carsa", and Castel dell'Alpi were almost entirely destroyed and had to be abandoned; even the link road to the provincial capital was blocked for a long time.

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<sup>6</sup> From the book "Firenzuola e il suo territorio" by Pier Carlo Tagliaferri, published by Lalli, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Paolo Guidotti: "Quaderno culturale bolognese" Issue 2; "La casa della montagna bolognese". Published by Atesa.

<sup>8</sup> "Paolo": a coin minted by Pope Paul II (Alessandro Farnese 1534-1549)

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Casali: "Percorsi e valichi dell'Appennino fra storia e leggenda". Arti grafiche Giorgi e Gambi, 1985, page 66.

<sup>10</sup> Paolo Guidotti: "Strade transappenniniche bolognesi". Published by Clueb, Bologna 1991, page 289.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CONDITIONS POSED BY RIVERS AND MOUNTAIN RIDGES ON THE MINOR AND SECONDARY ROAD SYSTEM

#### **1 - Local minor roads.**

#### **2 - Secondary middle-distance roads.**

##### **2.1 - ThePasseggere pass.**

##### **2.1.1 – From the Passeggere pass to Monghidoro.**

##### **2.1.2 – From the Passeggere pass to the Raticosa pass.**

##### **2.1.1 – From the Passeggere pass to Madonna dei Fornelli.**

##### **2.2 - S. Ansano di Brento.**

##### **2.3 - TheMontorio road.**

Watercourses have slowly and relentlessly eroded the earth's crust, creating valleys named after the river that flows through them; subsequently the ridges between opposing slopes are also named after the rivers, for example, between the rivers Setta and Savena, between the rivers Savena and Idice, and so on. As regards the Bolognese Apennines we interested in, these ridges start from the mountainous Futa massif and fan out lengthways like peninsulas, sloping down from the mountains to the hills, until they reach the plain. The road system created within these strips of land has mostly been conditioned by the rivers and torrents that divide them. Other, (and no less important) causes forced the already precarious ancient long-distance road system to avoid areas tormented by erosion furrows and precipices, such as the Pliocene sandstone strip that cuts across the entire area that, from the valley of the Reno, through Badolo, Monte Adone, Livergnano, Monte delle Formiche and Monterenzio, crosses the Sillaro as far as the hills on the Sallustra. In these areas, the ancient road system becomes sparse; the few existing routes are narrow and reflect the difficulties caused by the nature of the area.

#### **1 - Local minor roads.**

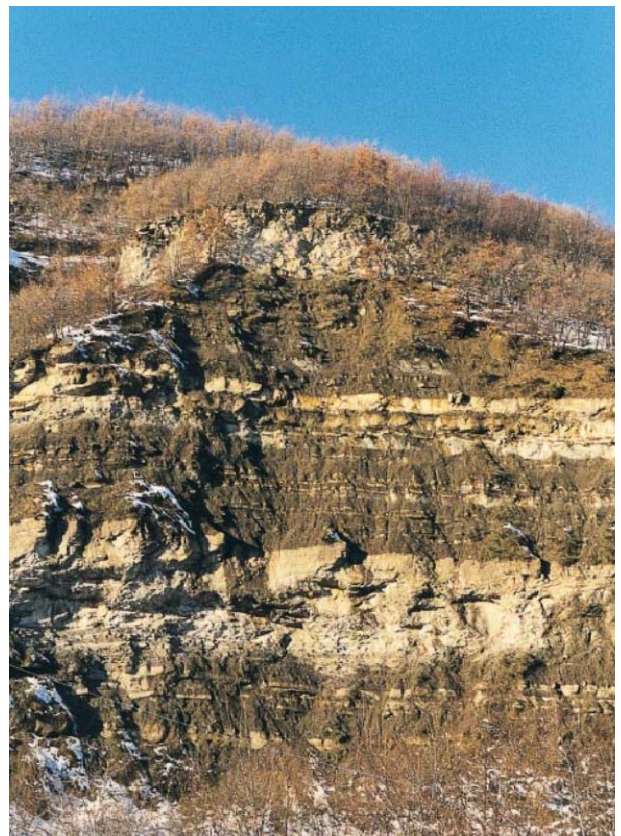
In spite of these natural obstacles, over thousands of years, man created a road network, which was generally accessible to people on foot and animals and, along some stretches, sledges<sup>1</sup>. This local road network still exists; a number of what were once mule tracks have been widened, covered with tarmac and transformed into roads, weaving along from village to village, crossing rivers over solid bridges with stone arches. However, there is another half-concealed "minor" road network made up of in trails, paths and mule tracks across meadows and woods. When these fields were once ploughed by farmers, they piled any emerging stones at the edges of these tracks, now covered with brambles and thorn bushes and almost entirely or practically inaccessible. However, in the meadows, this road network was mainly edged by hawthorn hedges; these paths are no longer used either and a mass of branches and brambles span from one side to the other, completely blocking the way. In the woods, especially in the areas populated by beach and oak trees, these tracks have been furrowed in the ground by the continuous passage of men and animals and water erosion; it is still possible to walk along lengthy stretches of these tracks.

<sup>1</sup> These were rustic sled-like vehicles, made using two tree trunks about 15 cm in diameter. If they were drawn by a pair of oxen, they were lashed together at the end; if they were pulled by a single animal (usually an ass), they were parallel. These vehicles (if they can be described as such) slid along the road surface and could be used over muddy surfaces full of stones and holes, and could even overcome steep gradients.





Valle del Savena (Scascoli): *an example of a "fault" (geological rock strata interrupted by tectonic movement).*



Valle del Savena (Trasasso): *various layers of limestone strata.*





*Two typical upper Apennine mule tracks: one shows obvious signs of rough paving laid in ancient times near a village, at the time inhabited by numerous families.*



*The other is below the level of the surrounding countryside; due to a lack of paving, the transit of people and animals over hundreds of years, and erosion by rainwater have caused progressive sinking.*

## 2 - Secondary middle-distance roads.

Added to this complex web of roadways, there is another more important and very probably older road system, which we shall define as “secondary”. This system includes middle-distance roads that always travel in a precise direction. Where possible, these roads are straight and run along the watersheds with brief diversions, in an attempt to avoid the unstable flanks of the mountain heights.

We have often travelled along the upper Apennine routes described further on in this chapter in an attempt to identify and solve the many mysteries (ruins and paving stones) we came across during our explorations. We especially wanted to discover and identify the locations people once aimed to reach when they opened these mule tracks.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the mule track prevailed over the road. This is how Arturo Palmieri describes the decline of the Roman road system<sup>2</sup>: *“In the Middle Ages, Roman roads lost their importance, and especially from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, Roman roads fell into the saddest and most ruinous state of abandonment. Political disorder, administrative chaos, wars, ethnic and religious hostilities, a decline in industry and trade, removed every means and motive to preserve*

*roads. Nothing but a trace remained of the Roman roads. Huge stretches of these beautiful paved roads soon disappeared, and with time, the rest disappeared too. Just simple tracks remained, created by the passage of horses and people on foot”.*



*Pian di Balestra (August 1998): the woods covering the Apennine mountain ridge from Pian di Balestra to the Futa pass are still as uncontaminated as they were in the Middle Ages; just as in past centuries, robust mules are still used to transport wood to the nearest carriage road.*

<sup>2</sup> Arturo Palmieri: “La montagna Bolognese nel Medio Evo”, published by Zanichelli, Bologna, 1929, page 322.



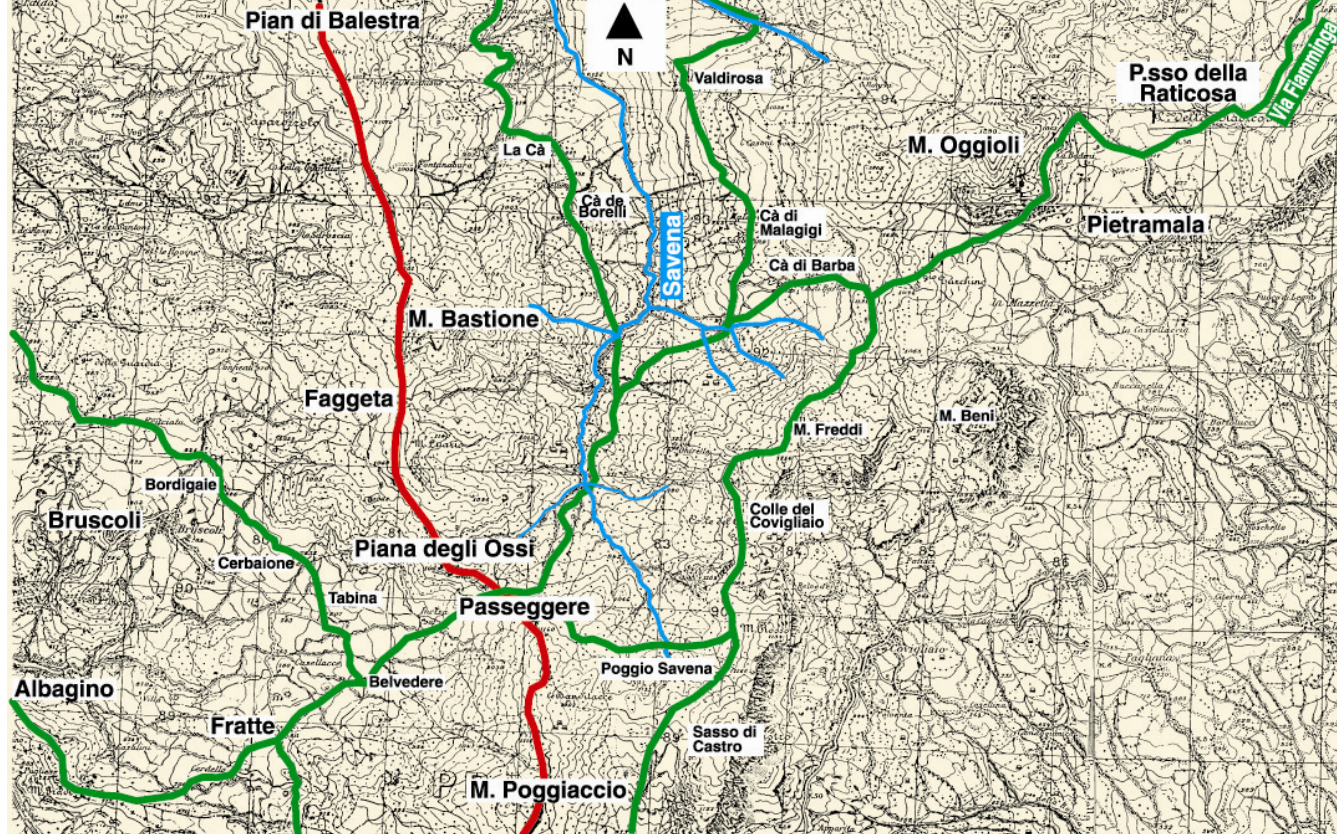


Plate 6

- The route of the Roman transapennine road.
- The routes of the medieval mule-tracks to Passeggere.

(Italian Military Geographic Institution (I.G.M.) authorisation No. 5034 dated 13.07.99)

## 2.1 - The Passeggere pass

The road through the Passeggere pass is an example of a “secondary” road, located at an altitude of 1010 m above sea level between two mountains: Luario (1140 m above sea level) to the north and Banditacce (1202 m above sea level) to the south. This pass has never been honoured in the chronicles of the past by the transit of famous personages, nor has it ever been deemed worth mentioning by scholars of historic road systems. Even after our recent and well-known discoveries, dedicated to the study of the Apennine road system, no one has ever mentioned this pass, nor the series of Ligurian “castellars” which guard the oldest itinerary towards Tuscany north and south of the Passeggere pass.

Passeggere comes from “passeggeria” [passing]. Its name leaves no doubts: a place of frequent passage, where passage is easy. We stated at the start of this paragraph that this is an example of a “secondary” road, but this place

could not have been very “secondary” considering it is traversed by a large road which unravels for tens of kilometres south as well as northwards<sup>3</sup>.

However, we do not wish to discuss this great road, but a number of mule tracks that crossed the Passeggere pass<sup>4</sup>.

These all travelled from southwest to northeast because their aim was to connect the people living in Castiglion dei Pepoli in the Gambellato basin with Romagna.

### 2.1.1 – From the Passeggere pass to Monghidoro

One of the most important of these roads (still practicable today), descends as far as the Savena. It crosses the upper part of the Savena, where the river flows as three streams, called the “tre Savenelle” [three little Savenas], which have a limited flow rate and are therefore easily forded even when the river is flooded.

<sup>3</sup> The “Flaminia Militare”.

<sup>4</sup> It is now used by merry groups of tourists travelling towards the Futa pass or the Boccadirio Sanctuary, or on their way to visit the large brick kiln installation in nearby Piana degli Ossi. However, we are certain that in past centuries, travellers using this crossroads proceeded at a fast pace and on their guard, fearful of meeting bandits, highwaymen and outlaws of every description. Travellers proceeding along the east-west axis have to cross a true mountain pass, whereas those travelling along the north-south axis pass through a hollow.

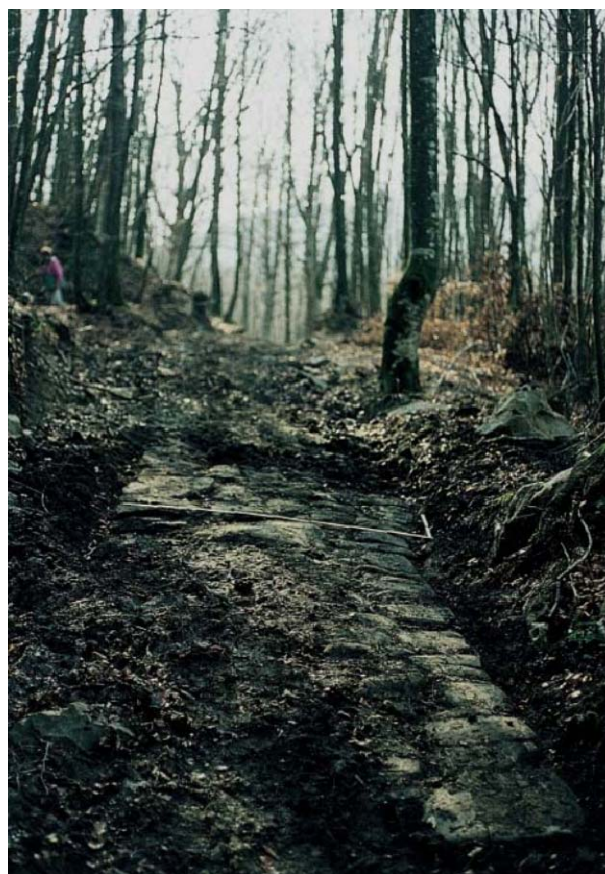




It then continues along the slopes of mount Freddi, on the right bank of the Savena, passing through one of the most verdant woods on the entire Tuscan-Emilian Apennines: majestic, centuries-old oaks frame an enchanted landscape where clearings, ponds and plants are alternated by streams with crystal clear water, flowing with a tuneful murmur down the side of the mountain.

Medieval ruins testify the past presence of a flourishing rural community. The area is presided over by the remains of a building, constructed in a dominant position and still called the "Casa del Papa" [Pope's House]. Although the road is narrow, at times it sinks between high banks of earth supported by walls and large dry stones, indication it was used for a long time before it was paved. In fact, about 700 m before and after the "Casa del Papa", the road is 1.60 m wide and carefully paved with sandstone slabs.

As regards the events that occurred in the Apennines during the dark centuries of the Middle Ages, we have found no mention of this area, nor about the paving on the road, or the destruction of its buildings, which must have taken place in violent circumstances considering that they still bear traces of fire. The devastation arouses the suspicion that this may have been the work of the terrible mercenary troops under the command of



*Remains of the 1.60 m wide paved mule-track on the slopes of mount Freddi; this road came from Passeggere, crossed the source of the Savena and headed eastwards; it then branched off towards the Monghidoro ridge and the Raticosa pass and Piancaldoli (this latter stretch was called the Via Fiamminga).*





*The west versant of the ridge near Bruscoli (centre); the Passeggere pass lies at the lowest point of the ridge. The highest summit is Poggiaccio and Poggio Castelluccio on its right. In the foreground stands the isolated hill of Poggio Rocca where it is still possible to see the remains of the medieval castle of Bruscoli (12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries).*

Count Lando, who in 1358, caused widespread death and destruction, terrorising the inhabitants of the mountains and leaving a trail of burnt ashes and hangings wherever they went<sup>5</sup>. This theory is in part confirmed by the fragments of ceramics found among the ruins, which can be dated back to about this period.

Some 6 kilometres after passing through this area of destruction, the road reaches the ridge between the rivers Savena and Idice, just south of Monghidoro, in Cà del Costa, passing through Pian d'Ardole, Monte del Comune and Piamaggio. Looking westwards from this watershed, it is possible to enjoy fantastic sunsets over mount Cimone and Corno alle Scale and, nearer, see most of the ridge between the Setta and Savena; eastwards it is possible to see mount Canda and most of the ridge between the Idice and Sillaro, which slopes down from Spedaletto and Casoni di Romagna, as far as Villa di Cassano.

This ridge has always been a popular place for settlements, which we attribute to the stability of its almost entirely sandstone terrain from Monghidoro to Pianoro,

free of the landslide-prone and unstable clay frequently found on the ridges further east. This ridge has had problems in terms of roads due to the instability of the ground



*The mule track heading eastwards near the Passeggere pass; the centuries-old passage of people on foot and animals has caused the unpaved roadbed to sink considerably.*

<sup>5</sup> Stefano Casini: "Dizionario biografico, geografico, storico"; Volume 1, page 90. Count Lando was Corrado Lando di Svevia or Corrado Virtinguer di Landau.





*S. Ansano di Brento: the historic church before its total destruction by the bombardments during the war fought here in 1944-45. (The CARISBO Historic Art and Documentation Collection).*

south of Monghidoro, especially along the stretch between Cà del Costa-Raticosa. Perhaps this was why the road that started at the Passeggere pass (which was stable and smooth) was preferred by those who wanted to travel from Monghidoro to the Futa pass.

#### **2.1.2 – From the Passeggere pass to the Raticosa pass.**

The most important route was certainly the mule-track from the Passeggere pass, across Colle del Covigliaio and mount Freddi, to the Raticosa pass. Here it was possible to find a vast area served by ridge roads that descended fan-like as far as the Via Aemilia along the stretch between the course of the river Idice and Imola<sup>6</sup>.

#### **2.1.1 – From the Passeggere pass to Madonna dei Fornelli.**

Another mule-track went from the Passeggere pass to Madonna dei Fornelli along the slopes left of the Savena, avoiding the snow-covered winter peaks of mounts Luario, Bastione and Monte dei Cucchi.

#### **2.2 - S. Ansano di Brento.**

Another road junction belonging to the “secondary” road system was near what was once the church of S. Ansano di Brento. Today only a few stones remain of this very ancient building; now covered in brambles, many of the hewn stones were removed after the Second World War and re-used in Scascoli and Livergnano.

Destroyed during the 1944-45 war, S. Ansano has fallen into oblivion. The painstaking description by the unforgettable Luigi Fantini during a visit to S. Ansano after its destruction in the summer of 1945 is significant<sup>7</sup>: “*a few stretches of the perimeter wall of the church were left standing: the bell tower and the ancient oratory of S. Ansano had disappeared, nothing else remained except the small Romanesque apse.*”

*All the cypress trees and every other neighbouring tree had disappeared from the small suggestive cemetery, whereas the area surrounding the holy enclosure had literally been transformed into a hollow of bomb craters, where*

<sup>6</sup> At Colle del Covigliaio this road later joined another important main road. In fact, those crossing the Futa pass to reach the north versant of the Apennines and wanting to avoid passing below the precipice east of Sasso di Castro and the stretch below the crag of mount Beni, could take (from the village of La Traversa) the road west of Sasso di Castro which, at Colle del Covigliaio, rejoined the road from the Passeggere pass.

<sup>7</sup> Luigi Fantini: “Antichi edifici della montagna bolognese”; Volume 2, page 139.

*the fragments of coffins and human bones emerged in a haphazard chaos. I left the place horrified, disgusted and bitter with the sad thought that such careless profanation was the work of that vertical biped science has classified with the reverberating title of Homo sapiens!”*

Among the skilfully hewn stones in the remains of the small Romanesque apse Fantini refers to, there are a number of bricks featuring handgrips, which probably came from a nearby Roman ruin.

The age of this church is mentioned in “Le Chiese Parrocchiali della Diocesi di Bologna” [The Parish Churches in the Diocese of Bologna] by Luigi Aureli with these words: “*This church certainly existed at the dawn of Christianity as certified by many authentic documents. In the sixth century, when it is said that the ancient Brento was destroyed, the church and its environs were donated by Agapetus the First to Theodore the Sixteenth, Bishop of Bologna. The donation was confirmed in about 590 by Pelagius I and Charlemagne in 771(...)”*<sup>8</sup>.

It must have been an important centre in past centuries.

S. Ansano was linked to Pianoro Vecchio by a practical road with long stretches of paving on the left of the Savena. It then joined the stretch of Roman road built during the imperial age (which had the names of *miliari*, such as *None*, *Octò* and *Sesto*) and which reached Bologna<sup>9</sup>.

Four important mule tracks reached the north of this parish; the first, to the west, arrived in Brento along a steep rise, the second headed south along the course of the Savena and then climbed the slopes of Monterumici until it reached the ridge road. The other two forded<sup>10</sup> the Savena a few hundred metres apart; the track further downstream reached Livergnano, the other climbed to Guarda, mount Castellare, Anconella and



S. Ansano di Brento (January 1999): *the remains of the apse of the church of S. Ansano. Franco Santi photographs the niche where a Roman brick featuring handgrips is walled.*



S. Ansano di Brento (January 1999): *on the inside wall of the ruined apse of the church of S. Ansano it is possible to observe a Roman brick featuring hand grips which has been incorporated in the niche, evidently found nearby.*

Loiano. Although the latter have not been surfaced, they can be used by traffic.

<sup>8</sup> Luigi Aureli: “Le Chiese Parrocchiali della Diocesi di Bologna, ritratte e descritte”; S. Tommaso d’Aquino Printing Works, 1849 Volume III, Parish No. 69.

<sup>9</sup> We describe the route of this Roman road in more detail in chapter XXI.

<sup>10</sup> This was the most important ford across the Savena along its course through the hills. It can still be forded by cars and tractors. At this point, the waters of the Savena slow down to overcome the Pliocene barrier downstream, depositing pebbles and gravel and splitting into numerous streams, thus allowing passage from one side to another almost all year round.





S. Ansano di Brento (January 1999): *the very ancient track on the left bank of the Savena can still be seen today about a kilometre north of the church ruins.*

The mill of S. Ansano stands on the right bank of the Savena, at the junction between these two roads. All that remains is a dilapidated building covered in brambles and brushwood; the nature of its industry demanded that it stood on a crossroads.

### 2.3 - The Montorio road.

The road to Montorio is perhaps the most enigmatic and mysterious of all. It leaves the road on the ridge between the Setta and Savena, descends from Monte dei Cucchi, goes through the small village of Borgo, crosses the Pian del Voglio-Rioveggio provincial road at Montefredente and continues along the entire ridge between the Setta and Sambro; after the village of Monteacuto Vallese, it reaches Montorio. Below Montorio, just before the river Setta, it intersects trunk road 325 to Castiglione dei Pepoli and descends to the river. After crossing the river, it goes through La Quercia, ascends to S. Martino and Caprara and descends towards Sperticano, in front of the Misa Etruscan necropolis in Marzabotto. We have no theory to put forward about this road. However, we would like to mention that various Etruscan statuettes from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. have been found along this route, which covers a distance of less than 30 kilometres on one of the most stable terrains found in the Apennines.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE FOUR TRANSAPENNINE PASSES USED IN DIFFERENT ERAS

- 1 - Montepiano.
- 2 - Giogo.
- 3 - Osteria Bruciata.
- 4 - Futa.

There are four Apennine passes near the Bologna-Florence route from west to east: Montepiano, Futa, Osteria Bruciata and Giogo di Scarperia. Their altitude ranges from the 714 m above sea level of Montepiano to the 917 m above sea level of Osteria Bruciata.

These passes have variably shaped the history of the road system whenever man has had to cross the Apennine backbone, whether for trade, transhumance, war or invasion.

#### 1 - Montepiano

This is the most western of the four passes and links Castiglione dei Pepoli to the Tuscan versant towards Prato. Its northern slopes open out on the Setta valley, whose riverbed winds around the almost perpendicular mountainsides. Passage through this area is very difficult; there is not a suitable route through the valley bottom nor along the ridge, and communication between Prato and Castiglione dei Pepoli has always been extremely gruelling right up to the last decades of the past century. The mule track that crossed the pass was one of the most impracticable and demanding. Just think that until the mid nineteenth century, further downstream the only route from Castiglione dei Pepoli was along the gravelly shore of the Setta, accessible only when the water level was low enough<sup>1</sup>. However, a route along

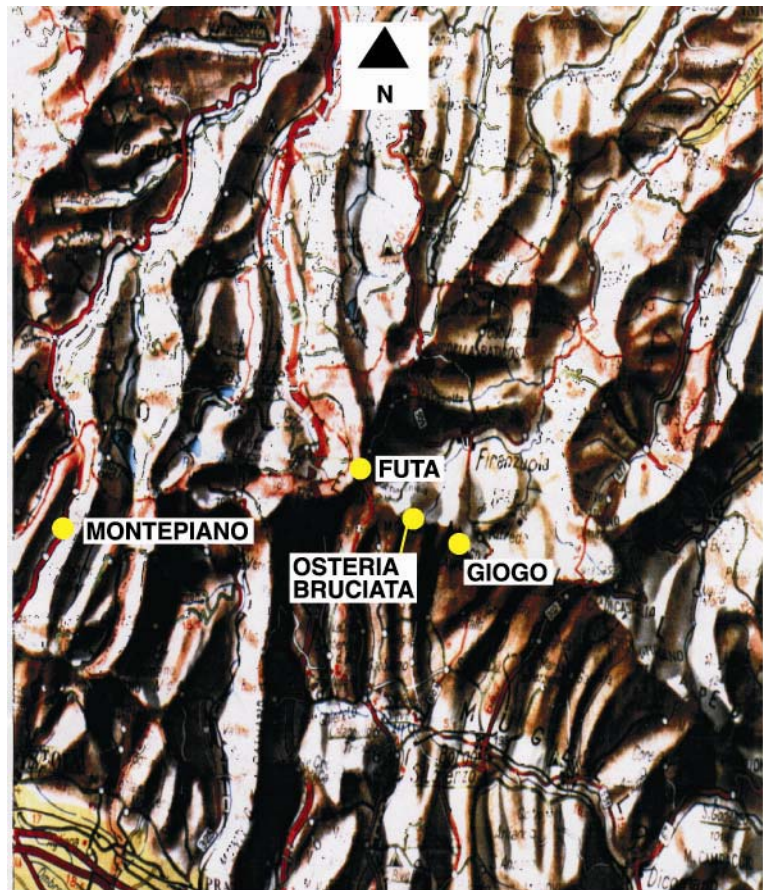


Plate 7

The four Apennine passes used in different eras. From the west: Montepiano, Futa, Osteria Bruciata and Giogo di Scarperia.

<sup>1</sup> Paolo Guidotti: "Strade transappenniniche bolognesi dal millecento al primo novecento, Porrettana, Futa, Setta". Published by Clueb, Bologna, 1991. A very well documented volume about this route.

a riverbed cannot be defined as a road. This precarious situation is mentioned by Paolo Guidotti *"The engineer, Mr. Mattioli, entrusted by the consortium of the Setta valley Municipalities to study a route from Bologna to Castiglione, states that there is no alternative except along the bed of the Setta from Sasso to Castiglione and from there to Montepiano and S. Quirico as far as the confluence of the rivers Setta and Brasimone and then mule-tracks through narrow gorges or atop very high sierras"*.

To reach Castiglione dei Pepoli from Bologna, it was advisable to follow a route along the present-day trunk road 65 over the Futa pass (Pianoro, Loiano, Monghidoro, etc.) as mentioned by G. Fontana who tells of a trip to Castiglione accomplished a few years after 1870<sup>3</sup>: *"The Tuscan Futa road was the route adopted by whoever wanted to travel without breaking their back astride a horse along the rough tracks or the gravelly shore of the river... There were various tracks from Futa to Castiglione: through S. Giacomo, Baragazza, or by descending before the Futa to Piano and then to Baragazza, then ascending to Castiglione. This was the route taken in 1711 by Captain G. Antonio Cardì, envoy of the Commissioner of Imperial Feuds in Italy, to inspect the feud of Castiglione; it was also the route taken by Cardinal Lambertini in 1731"*.

If the conditions of these transapennine roads were so precarious in the nineteenth century, one can just imagine what they were like during earlier centuries.

It was very difficult to open a road on the Emilian versant due to the deep ravines, and work continued for 30 years to build just six kilometres of road from Castiglione to the border with Tuscany<sup>4</sup>. Things were not much easier on the other versant; the road from Prato kept to the valley bottom as far as S. Quirico, (278 m above sea level) and then thanks to a long route with a series of hairpin bends (which sometimes headed backwards) it reached Montepiano

717 m above sea level) passing through the village of Sasseta, which clung to an impervious ridge.

## 2 - Giogo

The Giogo pass is the furthest east and only became practicable after the Florentines started to build Firenzuola (8 April 1332). Before this, the path must have been barely accessible to foot traffic if the Comune of Florence decided to open the road from Scarperia to Firenzuola<sup>5</sup>.

We shall only make two observations, which are more of a practical than historic nature:

- the Florentines opened the road through the Giogo pass solely for military reasons; nevertheless, being near the direct axis between Bologna and Florence, and because the stretch through the pass was maintained, for centuries it was the only accessible route (on foot or at the most, astride a mule);

- because the Florentines built Firenzuola on the left bank of the Santerno to better dominate enemy territory, they must have also built a bridge. However, the river must have destroyed the bridge more than once and dragged it downstream if in 1751 the Scarperia to Firenzuola road was defined in a travel guide as *"blind and broken due to flooding by the Santerno which had to be forded"*<sup>6</sup>.

It is easy to deduce that this pass (along with the Montepiano pass) has nothing to do with the concept of a Roman transapennine route. The Romans would never have descended from the 968 m above sea level of the Raticosa pass to the 400 m above sea level of the marshy plain of Firenzuola, crossing a torrential river such as the Santerno, only to ascend once more to the 882 m above sea level of the Giogo pass, unless this shortened the route.

<sup>2</sup> Paolo Guidotti: work cited, page 255.

<sup>3</sup> Paolo Guidotti: work cited, page 255. Extracts that Guidotti drew from A. Bignardi: "Una gita di cento anni fa (1875) a Castiglione" from the memories of G. Fontana, Parma 1975. Pompeo Mattioli, some considerations about the new Val di Setta carriageway, Parma 1865.

<sup>4</sup> Paolo Guidotti: work cited, page 305.

<sup>5</sup> We shall not narrate the vicissitudes of the various personages who have travelled through this pass during the past centuries, until the opening of the Futa postal service in 1762; these events have already been described in extraordinary diary accounts filled with an abundance of detail by Repetti, Sterpos and Rombai.

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Rombai and Marco Sorelli: "Percorsi e valichi dell'Appennino fra storia e leggenda, Futa, Osteria Bruciata, Giogo"; page 42.



### 3 - Osteria Bruciata

Daniele Sterpos is certainly the most convinced advocate of a medieval passage through the Osteria Bruciata pass. With regard to this he writes:<sup>7</sup> *“Existence is acknowledged of another road which crossed the mountains between Bologna and Florence during the upper Middle Ages and which may have linked the two cities: the route from the upper valley of the Santerno, now the site of Firenzuola, to the shores of the Sieve and the Arno. It can fundamentally be identified thanks to a number of parishes, which very probably existed long before the year one thousand. There are still two country churches in Cornacchiaia on the Santerno and in Sant’Agata in Mugello, which according to tradition were built by countess Matilde in the 11th century, but which present a primitive plan which goes back to a much earlier date. Cornacchiaia and Sant’Agata respectively lie north and south of a high mountain range: when linked as the crow flies, they form a line along the Apennine ridge (perfectly aligned with the points of the compass mentioned above) which passes close to the depression forming the Osteria Bruciata pass. It is very likely that the road took advantage of the pass and the two country churches mark the exact point in which the road comes to a relatively flat area on either versant”*.

This is Sterpos’ description so far of the route across the Osteria Bruciata pass. He then goes on to describe the itinerary towards Bologna with these words<sup>8</sup>: *“And so, from Cornacchiaia to Florence, from the Santerno to the Arno, it is possible to follow a route which has many of the features of early medieval roads, starting with the steep gradients. Can the same be said for the stretch of road from Cornacchiaia to Bologna? Is it possible to prove that it is part of the “oldest road to Bologna”, or at least the oldest in terms of the Middle Ages? According to Repetti and Niccolai, to continue northwards from Cornacchiaia along the upper Santerno valley, the road had to go through Le Valli and Pietramala: a logical route, the same as the Bologna road used from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Just above Pietramala, the exit of the internal hollow*

*of Firenzuola is marked by the Radicosa corridor; from there the high ridge between the Savena and Idice stretches towards Bologna where Monghidoro and Loiano now stand”*.

It is true that the itinerary described by the illustrious scholar was the shortest from Cornacchiaia to Bologna, but the same cannot be said for those who reached Pietramala from the Bolognese versant and who were heading for the Mugello valley. The altitude of the locations along the itinerary across the Osteria Bruciata pass measure: Pietramala 851 m above sea level, Cornacchiaia 473 m above sea level, Osteria Bruciata 917 m above sea level. The route through the Futa pass is almost flat: Pietramala 851 m above sea level, Covigliaio 855 m above sea level, Traversa 851 m above sea level, Futa 903 m above sea level. Along the first route, it was necessary to pass the difficult crossing on the river Santerno (although on the upper part of the river) as well as the steep and tortuous stretch from Cornacchiaia to the Osteria Bruciata pass.

We believe this route from Pietramala to Osteria Bruciata was kept open during the Middle Ages by the Ubaldini, feudal lords of the area, for their own practical reasons<sup>9</sup>, and subsequently used by wayfarers to cross the Apennine ridge in both directions. It is reasonable to believe that the Futa pass was not used during this epoch due to a serious political or geological problem.

### 4 - Futa.

The Futa pass is west of the Osteria Bruciata pass and east of Montepiano. It acts as a watershed between the Gambellato torrent to the west and the river Santerno to the east.

It is exactly located along the ideal straight line joining Bologna to Florence and is more or less the same distance from both cities. Therefore, it is obvious that the Futa pass has always been on the shortest Apennine route thanks to the random and advantageous position of the ridges that start from the pass, whether north towards Bologna or south towards Florence.

<sup>7</sup> Daniele Sterpos: “Comunicazioni stradali attraverso i tempi, Bologna-Firenze”. Istituto Geografico De Agostini, Novara 1961; page 32.

<sup>8</sup> Daniele Sterpos, work cited, page 34.

<sup>9</sup> The Ubaldini family owned a number of castles along the road.



Medieval historians often use the name *Stale* to describe this pass; that is a place of passage for wayfarers and armies.

This is Emanuele Repetti's description<sup>10</sup>: "*Futa in the Stale Apennine. The most commonly used pass in the central Apennine mountain chain is called the Futa (...) This is where (...) the old main road passed from the Province of Mugello across the Stale pass, and from hence it continued to Bologna*". Repetti also narrates that: "*in 1358, the Republic of Florence built fences, towers and thick battlements made of wood all along the pass to defend itself from any new incursions by bands of mercenaries intending to use the Stale pass*" (Matteo Villani: "*Cronica*").

From Lino Chini we also learn that<sup>11</sup>: "*For a number of years, Italy had been overrun by various bands of armed bandits, bands of mercenaries (ceteris omissis) who caused immense damage wherever they stayed and wherever they passed. Famous was the band led by an ex monk who once belonged to the order of the Hospitallers, called Friar Monreale D'Albarno. After 1353, he started to pillage Tuscany, Romagna and the Marches, placing levies on towns and provinces, looting and carrying out massacres wherever he went. Because there was no other way of getting rid of them, populations paid the bandits huge amounts of money. Drawn by his demon to Rome, the wicked ex monk did not enjoy the fruits of his villainous thefts because Cola di Rienzo, Tribune of the Roman People with a sentence passed on 29 August 1354, cut off his head. However, his large band of mercenaries stayed together and the just as cruel and terrible Conte di Laundau, called Conte Lando in folktales, became its leader*<sup>12</sup>. Once he was at their head, he led his band to prey on the kingdom of Naples and Lombardy. In 1357, he descended to Bologna where, according to old Ammirato, it was possible to pass through the mountains and enter the Mugello in just one day through an open gap in the mountain, called the *Stale* road. The Florentines knew that they must not waste time and thus asked

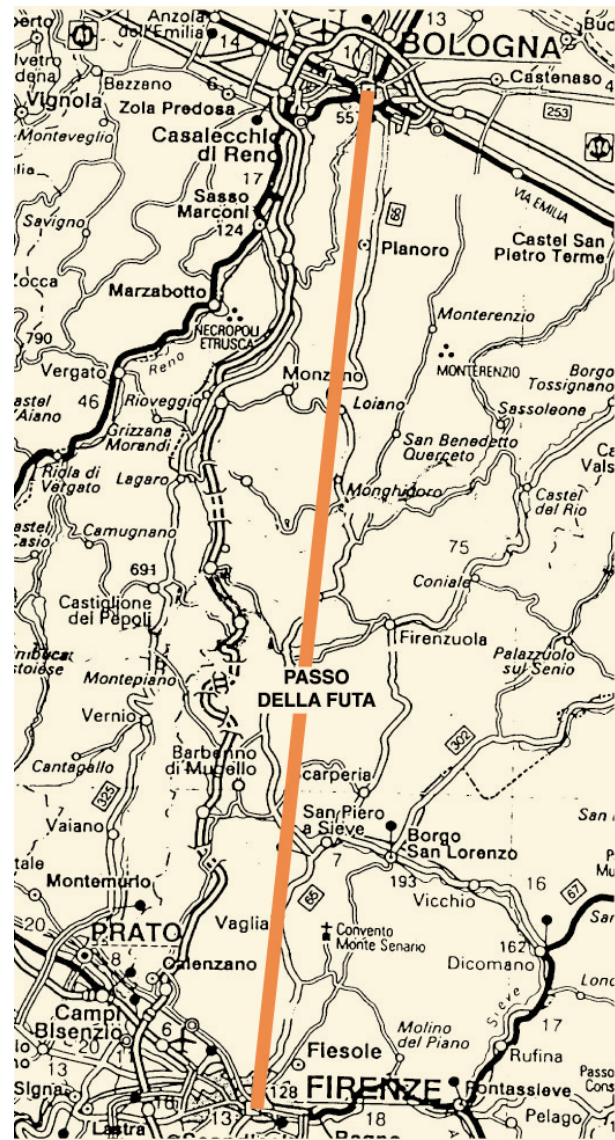


Plate 8  
The Futa pass lies exactly along the ideal straight line between Bologna and Florence.

the Ubaldini if they could help defend their estates: the Ubaldini agreed to this and the Republic sent six thousand soldiers, of which half were crossbowmen and nine hundred cavalry. The Ubaldini came with 1500 soldiers from among their vassals, and they immediately gave the order to build a barricade measuring a mile and half between two mounds along the *Stale* road; which they then fortified with barriers made of

<sup>10</sup> Emanuele Repetti: "Dizionario geografico, fisico, storico della Toscana". Florence 1835, Volume II, page 364.

<sup>11</sup> P. Lino Chini: "Storia del Mugello". Anastatic reprint of the original edition, Florence 1875, published by Soc. Multigrafica, page 193.

<sup>12</sup> As already mentioned in the former chapter, Conte Lando was Corrado Lando di Svevia or Corrado Virtinguer di Landau. He died in 1363, in Lombardy stabbed by a lance during a fight.





*The Futa pass in the foreground (903 m). On the horizon from left to right: Sasso di Castro (1276 m) with the village of Traversa at its foot, mount Beni (1263m) and mount Canda (1158 m). The Raticosa pass is between mount Beni and mount Canda.*

*huge beach trees which formed a stockade and this is where they set up their tents and camp.*

The band of mercenaries fell into an ambush set up by the local people at the Scalelle pass in Belforte, in the Careglia Apennines, between the Sieve and Lamone valleys. Over a thousand horses and three hundred horsemen were killed during the battle. The remaining mercenaries regrouped at Dicomano and sought refuge in Vicchio castle.

Chini then continues <sup>13</sup>: *“The band of mercenaries stayed in Vicchio for just one day and one night, because on learning the news, fresh soldiers arrived from Florence and the mercenaries knew they were in grave danger. Therefore, they left Vicchio, and after descending onto the plain, and following a successful skirmish against the crossbowmen on the banks of the Sieve and after killing more than 60 under the command of Ghisello degli Ubaldini, they took the Stale road and returned to Imola in Romagna accomplishing a 42 mile journey in a single day! (...) Thus having liberated the Mugello and the Comune of Florence from the threat of these hoards of thieves and bullies, when the Lords learned that they had retreated into*

*Romagna, from where they could newly invade their county at any moment, they decided to fortify the Stale pass”.* From Repetti’s description of the Futa pass and Chini’s historic tale of the wars fought by Conte Lando, it is possible to draw two important conclusions about the pass.

*The most used*, according to Repetti, for the simple reason (in our opinion) that it was the easiest way of getting from one side to the other of the Apennine range. This is still true today; after all, it takes more than a few thousand years to change the orography of an area, so very little change can have occurred after just a few centuries.

The mountains, valleys and rivers we admire today on our walks are the same seen by the Etruscans, Ligurians, Romans and all those hoards of barbarians that have invaded Italy during every period of history. Bologna has not changed location and has been positioned below Colle dell’Osservanza since it was established. The Mugello valley is still there, on the other side of the Apennines where it stretches from the Calvana mountains to Dicomano.

<sup>13</sup> P. Lino Chini: work cited, page 302.

Today, when the third millennium lies at our door, walking is a favourite pastime. Jolly parties of ramblers meet everywhere, especially on our Apennines in the search for much sought-after uncontaminated nature. Anyone can associate a pastime with the curiosity of discovering the shortest and most convenient route from Bologna to Florence. We only suggest the point of departure and arrival: Bologna and Fiesole<sup>14</sup>. Discover for yourselves the transapennine route followed by the Etruscans, Romans and, many centuries later, wayfarers and shepherds with their flocks striving to reach better winter pastures in Maremma.

We would like to point out that the Statute drawn up by the Florentine Customs Office in 1579 ordered *“every shepherd from Mugello, western Romagna or anywhere near Bologna on the other side of the Apennines (particularly numerous were those from Bruscoli, Firenzuola, Castro, Trasasso and Montefredente) wanting to lead their flocks to pastures in Maremma “along the usual and widest roads” from September to May of the following year, to report to the “Colla” or Customs Office in Barberino to pay the due tax”*<sup>15</sup>.

It is also clear from Chini’s words that the Futa (or Stale) pass was the most convenient. Chini tells that when *the bandits* were barricaded in Vicchio castle, not wanting to clash with the soldiers of the Republic of Florence, they took to the Stale road to return to Imola in Romagna. The Futa pass was certainly not the shortest route from Vicchio to Imola but after their former experience in the Scalelle gorge, they preferred an open, spacious, (although longer) route, where ambushes were less likely. Moreover, although the Florentines knew the mercenaries were in Romagna, they feared their return and hastily fortified the Stale pass.

Six hundred years after Conte Lando’s mercenaries invaded Tuscany, and precisely in the autumn of 1943,

the strategies of the “Oberkommando der Wehrmacht”, that is the high command of the German armed forces, decided to set up a defensive line called the “Gothic Line” along the northern Apennine chain. Impressive fortifications were built, especially near the mountain passes. But *“nature herself had taken the trouble to create a particularly weak point right at the centre of the ridge: the Futa pass where trunk road 65 to Bologna passes, 42 km from Florence. When the T.O.D.T.<sup>16</sup> was setting up and arming the Gothic Line, it soon became aware of this weakness and ensured that the defences on the Futa pass were the most formidable of all”*<sup>17</sup>.

These “formidable” defences persuaded the Anglo-American allies to move the direction of their attack on the Gothic Line east of the Futa pass, to the Giogo pass, which they won at dawn on 17 September 1944<sup>18</sup>.

These military events deserve a comparison. The hardships endured in the Middle Ages on transapennine journeys by famous personages (although they were accompanied by numerous servants, mounts and sedan chairs) cannot be compared to the transport problems of armies made up of thousands of foot soldiers and cavalry, wagons and all sorts of weapons and arms. The armies had to avoid narrow valleys, subject to ambush and all types of obstacles. To ensure their manoeuvres were swift and safe, they required open spaces, ridges with stable ground, not those scaly clays that make the tormented and impracticable mountainsides prone to frequent landslides.

These obvious requirements have convinced us that it was pointless to conceive, plan and build a transapennine road that was mainly for military use, unless it was built on the watershed ridge between the rivers Savena and Setta, and thus across the Futa pass.

<sup>14</sup> Cross the Apennines using whichever pass you prefer: the Giogo, Osteria Bruciata or the Futa pass (not the Montepiano pass which is too remote). You can either walk along the ridge between the Setta and Savena, between the Savena and the Idice or between the Idice and Sillaro. Using a step counter on your belt and a stopwatch, take note of the length of the route and the time it takes. Then take a different route on the way back.

<sup>15</sup> Leonardo Rombai and Marco Sorelli: work cited, page 40.

<sup>16</sup> T.O.D.T. was the German military engineering organisation.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Ordill: “The Gothic Line”. Published by Clueb, Bologna 1967, page 14.

<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the three American divisions employed in the operation on the Giogo pass lost 500 men and 2000 were wounded.

## **PART THREE**

### **THE PROBABLE PRE-ROMAN ROAD SYSTEM BETWEEN BOLOGNA AND FIESOLE**





## CHAPTER VII

### THE PROBABLE PRE-ROMAN ROAD SYSTEM BETWEEN BOLOGNA AND FIESOLE

- 1 - Nature points out the most convenient transapennine route to man.**  
**2 - Fiesole and Felsina: the destinations of the transapennine Etruscan route.**

#### **1 - Nature points out the most convenient transapennine route to man.**

Now that we are on the verge of entering the third millennium with all the weight of our culture, saturated by computers and satellite telecommunication systems, the most advanced mechanics, vehicles for travel by land and air which allow us to cover huge distances in a short time, it is undoubtedly difficult to delete over 2,500 years of history and civilisation and re-live the thoughts and worries of the Etruscan who in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. wanted to cross the Apennines.

Certainly many others before him will have ventured into the valleys along the Apennine range, to search for the most convenient, shortest and safest route among the numerous obstacles they must have encountered. And from that moment on, every other traveller that followed trod the same path, crushing the same blades of grass and the same fallen leaves. Thus, a path was created that signalled the route towards the desired destination; for centuries the existence of this path reassured our Etruscan ancestor, indicating the route to follow across the Apennines. Whoever chose this route as their preferred path certainly bore in mind the three primary requirements of anyone travelling on foot:

- brevity: then as now, man attempts to reach his destination by covering the shortest distance and this is achieved by travelling in a straight line, when the

nature of the terrain allows; therefore it is the “line of sight” that indicates the route to follow;

- convenience: man has always attempted to cover the distance with the most gentle gradient, over terrain that can be covered in any weather condition; if along certain stretches this is not possible, man tries to overcome the problem by laying cobbles, gravel or paving;
- safety: ridge routes have always been preferred because they offer two important advantages:
  - the possibility of getting one's bearings and a view over vast distances; therefore making it possible to see any enemies or predators;
  - there are no watercourses: crossings over rivers and streams have always constituted an enormous uncertainty for travellers. Whoever set out on a journey on foot was always in constant doubt as to whether a watercourse could be forded and the existence or not of gangways or footbridges over large rivers; a stream in flood or a collapsed gangway could compromise the journey, even if the destination was in sight.

However, the morphology of the Apennine chain does not always guarantee that all three requirements (brevity, convenience and safety) are present at the same time along every route. Thus, at times, to reach a certain destination, man has had to forgo one or more of these requirements.





*View of the Apennine ridges on the Bolognese versant. The red line indicates the ridge route used by the Etruscans and the Romans from Bologna to the Futa pass.*

## 2 - Fiesole and Felsina: the destinations of the Etruscan transapennine route.

Of the 94 kilometres from Bologna to Fiesole, from Bologna to the river Sieve (in Bilancino) as many as 71 kilometres run along a gently sloping ridge route which is perfectly aligned in the right direction: from Bologna (54 m above sea level) to Poggiaccio (1166 m above sea level) the ridge gradually rises for 50 kilometres and then descends for 21 kilometres as far as the river Sieve (233 m above sea level) near Bilancino.

From here, there were two possible paths to Fiesole.

One route crossed the Sieve west of Bilancino, avoiding marshes to the east, and then ascended to S. Giovanni in Petroio, as far as the river Trebbio (435 m above sea level) and then re-descended to Tagliaferro (250 m) and then continued along the valley of the river Carza, beyond Vaglia, and rose on the west versant of Poggio Torricella as far as "L'Uccellatoio" (altitude: 489). From here it descended again beyond Trespiano (266 m), then, after the

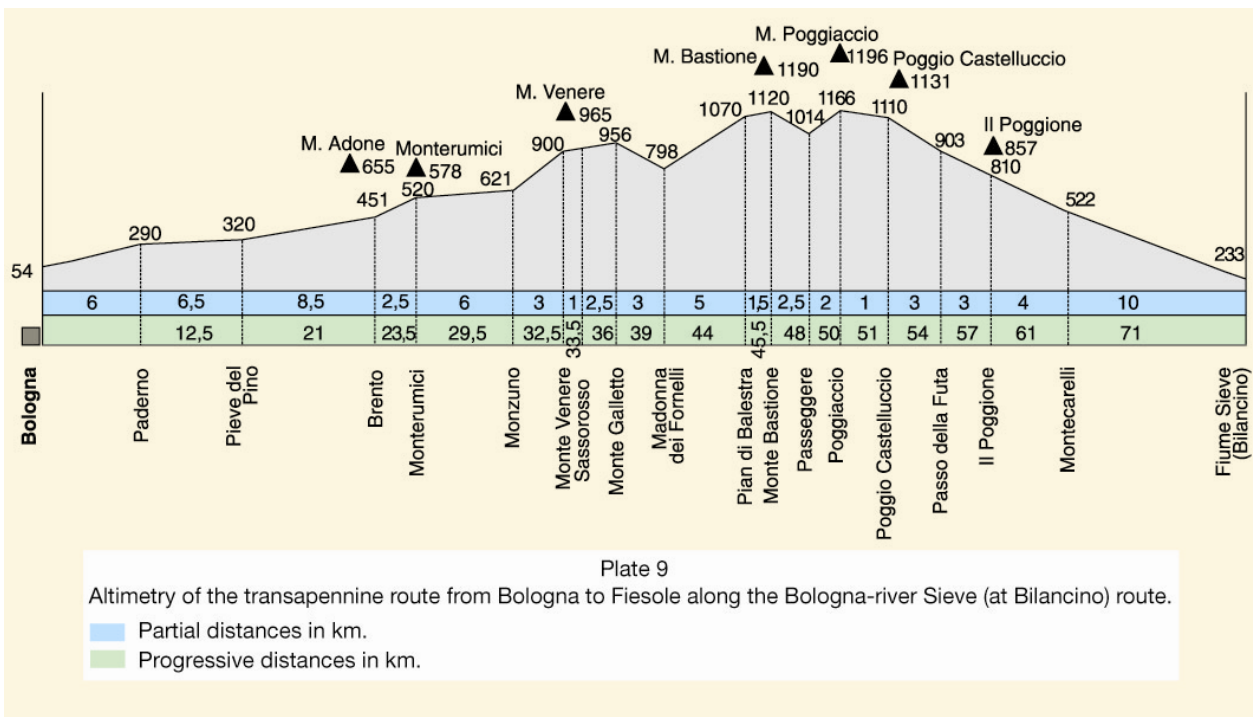
Lastra, it turned towards the river Mugnone (altitude: 100) reaching Fiesole at an altitude of 266.

The other path followed the Sieve as far as S. Piero (205 m), then it ascended the opposite versant passing near the Abbey of Buonsollazzo (540 m) as far as the peak of mount Senario (815 m), this is where the descent towards Fiesole (295 m) started across Poggio Le Croci (518 m) and Poggio al Pratone (702 m).

Comparing the two itineraries in terms of altimetry, the first was probably the preferred route, not only because it was shorter (-4 km) and with fewer differences in level (just 1203 m instead of 1572 m), but also because it avoided extensive marshes which probably covered the valley of S. Piero in Sieve at the time.

On the Emilian versant, the ridge has just an average gradient of 2.2% with 8.9% maximum peaks from the southern suburbs of Bologna to Paderno (2.5 km), 9% from Monzuno to mount Venere (3 km) and 7.6% from the Passeggere pass to mount Poggiaccio.



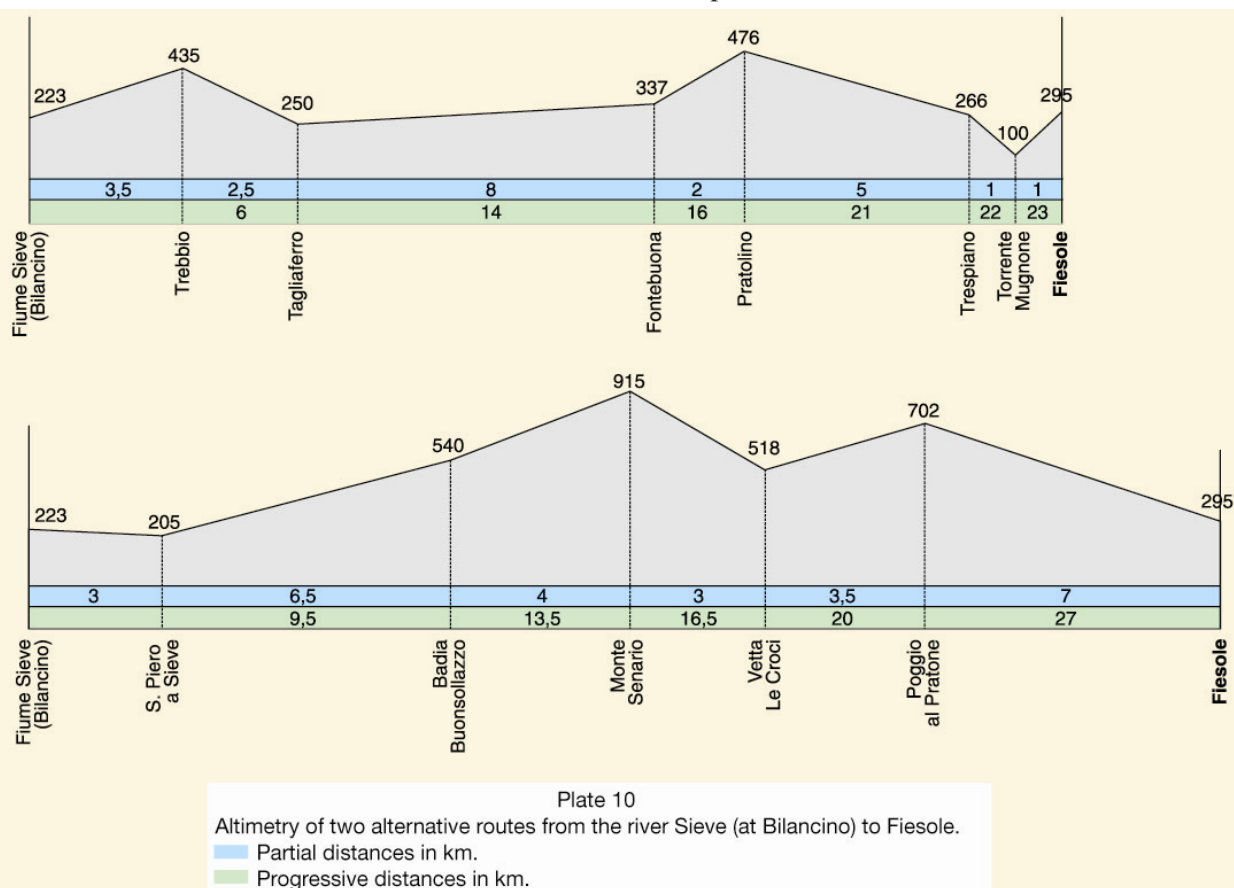


On the Tuscan versant the average gradient is 4.17% with 6 to 7% maximum peaks from Poggiaccio to the Futa pass (4 km) and 5.5% from Futa to Montecarelli (7 km).

Therefore, there is a “natural bridge” between the two versants, undoubtedly used by the Etruscans during

their maximum territorial expansion in the Po Valley (6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.)

Thus, Fiesole and Felsina were the destinations of most of the trade between Tuscan Etruria and Po Valley Etruria and the happy economic situation of these two cities derived from their position at the foot of the two Apennine versants.





*The level left ridge of the Savena used throughout the ages to cross the Apennines with ease. Behind stands the snow-capped Corno alle Scale.*

If one considers that this natural bridge has been used since prehistory, it is more than a rough guess to suppose that the transapennine route was not created to link two existing cities, but that the cities were built in strategic locations to supply and control the trade that was already travelling along the route.

The tried and tested use of this natural and practical transapennine route, compared to other relatively nearby routes, convinced the Romans that this was where they had to build their road.

It is also obvious that this was not the only transapennine path used by the Etruscans to reach Po Valley Etruria. According the principles that have always governed selection of the most convenient route, the Etruscans certainly must have used other *tramites* to cross

the Apennines, especially where a shorter, alternative route was preferable. Therefore, when travelling from northern Etruria (the present-day Pisa, Lucca, Pistoia, etc.) it is probable that they crossed the Collina pass and the Reno valley to reach Misa or Felsina, without passing through Fiesole.

Therefore, from Fiesole to Faenza, they would have passed through the present-day Borgo San Lorenzo, Marradi and Brisighella without travelling through Felsina. Then, more than now, the brevity of the route was fundamental because it saved time; 30 kilometres less meant one less day of travel with the consequent logistical advantages.

The map indicating the probable Etruscan itineraries forming links with the north shows that the most important and commonly used route passed through the Futa pass<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mauro Cristofani: "Rasenna - Storia e civiltà degli Etruschi"; published by Scheiwiller, Milan, 1986, page 135

Even the great Etruscologist, Mauro Cristofani, has the following to say about the Apennine passes used by the Etruscans:

*"... the entire problem regarding the relations established between the Etruscans and the people who lived on the other side the Apennines is caused by this bipolarism. As is known, communication was possible thanks to the ridge roads and the valleys created by the mid course confluents of the Arno, Sieve, Bisenzio and Ombrone, whose sources converge towards the Apennine watershed, where the Reno, Setta and the Savena have their origin".*





Plate 11  
The probable road routes used by the Etruscans in the 5th century B.C.

All traffic from central and southern Etruria, that is from Tarquinia, Vulci, Saturnia, Roselle, Vetulonia, Chiusi, Arezzo, Siena, Populonia, Volterra, etc., heading towards the Po Valley, had to converge in Fiesole and from here continue north towards Felsina. Felsina received the traffic arriving from Po Valley Etruria and especially from Spina, the most important Adriatic port for trade with Greece and the East.

Misa (near Marzabotto) was also undoubtedly a place of transit for Etruscan trade, which followed the valley of the Reno and continued beyond the Apennines through the Collina pass, probably just to reach the extreme north of Etruria. In fact we believe that the traffic from Felsina towards Fiesole (and therefore heading towards the centre-south of Etruria), crossed the Collina pass and followed the course of the Reno in spite of the presence of Misa in the valley because

they would have had to travel 29-30 km further compared to the Futa road.

This latter itinerary could also have been used as a practical link between Fiesole and Misa.

In fact, during our explorations, we noted that when coming from Fiesole, at Pian di Balestra (altitude: 1101 above sea level and 6 km north of Poggiaccio) a ridge goes off to the left along a diagonal that passes through Montefredente, Monte Acuto Vallese and Montorio; it gradually slopes down towards the river Setta, which it crosses upstream of Riveggio. Misa is only 9-10 km away from this point, easily reached by passing through “La Quercia” and the historic Monte Sole Park.

Therefore, we do not share the prevailing opinion of scholars who believe the Collina pass was

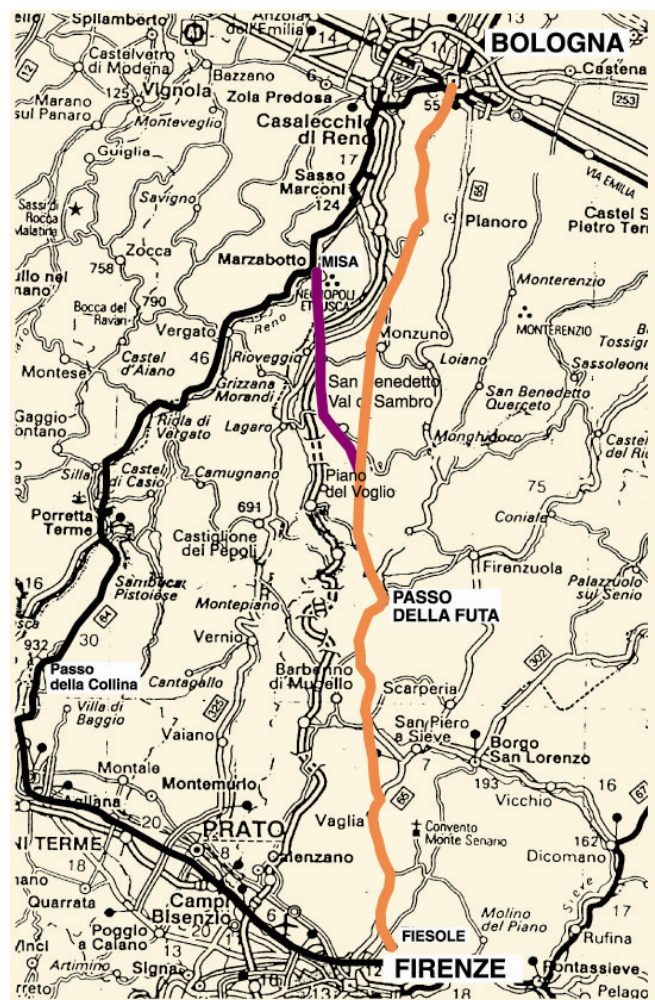


Plate 12  
The probable Etruscan route from Fiesole to Felsina.  
The detour towards Misa along the Montorio ridge.

the preferred route of the Etruscans to and from the Po Valley.

Misa could certainly not have competed with Felsina, which in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. had become an urban centre of primary importance, a reference point for the multitude of Etruscan settlements on the plain and located in a key position for contact with their native land.

It is true that more archaeological finds regarding the urban tissue of Misa have been found than those of Felsina; but it is obvious that because Roman and medieval Bologna were superimposed on the same site, it has not been possible to unearth the original extension of Felsina.

The extremely numerous tombs, uncovered during the past two centuries, indirectly testify the greatness and the importance of this city defined by Pliny as *Princeps Etruriae*.

The importance of the position of Bologna for the development of trade from and to Po Valley Etruria is also underlined by Guido Achille Mansuelli<sup>2</sup>: *“Only information from sources mention that Modena and Parma belonged to the Etruscans (ceteris omissis), but numerous finds in the internal and the western pre-Alp areas of the Po Valley clearly testify a flow of trade through the Po Valley towards the other side of the Alps. Within this picture, Bologna formed a weld between the internal Etruscan route towards Orvieto, Chiusi, Valdarno, the Apennine mountain passes and the Emilian foothills, now projected towards the continent”*.

The Celtic invasion of Po Valley Etruria determined the end of Etruscan dominion in the area, however the transapennine links between the two peoples were not completely destroyed. Trade continued between the two regions (although on a lesser scale), bearing in mind that the Gauls and the Etruscans were not always hostile. As a matter of fact, in a number of circumstances, they forged military alliances to contrast Roman expansion<sup>3</sup>.

The Apennine Ligurians very rarely interfered on the plains. There was a situation of mutual tolerance that allowed modest trade as well as the use of the transapennine paths and especially the main path through the Futa pass.

Fiesole was certainly no less important than Felsina, located in an enviable position above one of the most suggestive landscapes in Tuscany. Thanks to its strategic position it became increasingly important, until it not only became a military power guarding the most commonly used Apennine pass, but also a rich city, irreplaceable for its trade with Po Valley Etruria. In particular, when the latter region was conquered by the Celts, a strong military garrison at the foot of the Apennines became vital to defend Etruria. Perhaps it was in this historic context that Fiesole was equipped with a triple row of walls.

Nevertheless, with the progressive expansion of Rome, Fiesole also realised that it was better not to fight but to create alliances, acknowledging the advantage of being friends with the powerful Romans to fight against the invasions from the north (which continued to be a real danger until the last decades of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.)

Polybius mentions Fiesole when describing an invasion of Etruria by an army of Celts.

In 225 B.C., an army of 70,000 Gesati Celts crossed the Alps, summoned by the Boi and Insubre Gauls. After they crossed the Apennines, they dispersed an army of Etruscans and Sabines near Fiesole<sup>4</sup> and invaded Etruria in search of plunder. They met no other resistance because the Romans expected an attack near Piceno and so had reinforced their Adriatic front. Thus, the Celts reached Chiusi, where they encountered the Roman army stationed in Etruria and who were camped near them.

At this point Polybius narrates that<sup>5</sup>: *“... When night fell, the Celts lit their campfires. They left their cavalry there with orders*

<sup>2</sup> Guido Achille Mansuelli: “Profilo geografico culturale dell’Emilia preromana” in the “Storia dell’Emilia Romagna”, University Press, Bologna 1976, page 35.

<sup>3</sup> At the battle of Sentino, in 295 B.C., coalition of Etruscans, Umbri and Gauls was defeated by the Romans.

<sup>4</sup> Paolo Giudici: *Storia d’Italia narrata al popolo*; Published by G. Nerbini, Florence, 1930, Book Sixteen, paragraph 6, page 164.

<sup>5</sup> Polybius: work cited, book II, paragraph 25.



*that they should wait for daybreak, and then when they became visible to the enemy they were to retreat along the same route. Instead, under the cover of darkness, they headed towards the city of Fiesole and took up their positions. They intended to wait for the cavalry and carry out a surprise attack on the enemy who was following. At daybreak, when the Romans saw the cavalry was alone and thinking that the Celts had fled, they pursued the cavalry along the route of their retreat...*"

From this account, it is possible to understand that the false retreat by the Celtic cavalry probably took place along the same road they travelled during their advance into Etruria, which they were very familiar with and considered safe. If the Celts stopped near Fiesole to set up their ambush, the road they had used to reach Etruria passed through Fiesole. Therefore, it is probable that they used the transapennine route from Fiesole to Felsina through the Futa pass.

This theory is also backed up by the words of Paolo Giudici<sup>6</sup> who has the following to say about the descent of the Celts in Etruria in 225 B.C.: "... *Lucius Aemilius Papus took command of the operations against the Gauls and with an army of twenty thousand soldiers, joined along the way by the same number of Umbri, went to Arimino. A strong army of Cenomani Gauls and Veneti, allies of Rome, were threateningly camped near the broader with the Boi and another army of Etruscans and Sabines, commanded by a praetor, were ready to prevent the enemy from reaching the pass into Etruria*<sup>7</sup>. *There was also a reserve army waiting in Rome.*

*The formidable army of barbarians descended into Etruria over the Apennines. They clashed with the Etruscan and Sabine army near Fiesole, but in vain because the hoards of barbarians had the advantage during the battle that ensued and, after defeating the praetor's troops they continued to advance*

*and ravaged everywhere as far as Chiusi*"<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, according to Giudici, Fiesole was the first Etruscan city the Celts came across during their descent from the north; thus it is obvious that they used the existing transapennine route between Felsina and Fiesole which must have been practical and solid enough to allow the transit of an imposing army consisting in "*fifty thousand infantrymen and twenty thousand cavalry and chariots*"<sup>9</sup>.

Although it is easy to imagine the difficulties the Celtic army met while crossing the Apennines, one must presume that the "path" was an actual road; otherwise, the barbarians would not have reached Etruria. If there had only been a path, the twenty thousand cavalry and chariots would have had to march single file. If they had kept just two metres apart, when the head of the column reached Fiesole, the rear would have still been in Modena, leaving the column exposed to easy attack from the flank. Furthermore, the chariots must have needed a road at least 2-2.5 metres wide and the roadbed would have been destroyed after the transit of a few hundred chariots and cavalry unless it was very solid.

It is necessary to point out these facts because they give us an idea of what life was like at the time and provide us with important information about the road system. By researching Latin texts we have learnt to glean sufficient illumination from the scant geographical information to reconstruct the movements of armies and, consequently, the existence or less of roads.

In conclusion, these bellicose events confirm the existence in 225 B.C. of an important transapennine road axis between Felsina and Fiesole across the Futa pass; a road axis which in 187 B.C. was improved and paved where necessary by C. Flaminius.

<sup>6</sup> Paolo Giudici: work cited, book sixteen, paragraph 6, pages 163-164.

<sup>7</sup> Polybius: work cited, book II, paragraph 23-24: *As soon as the Romans learned that the Celts had crossed the Alps, they sent the consul, Lucius Aemilius with an army to defend Rimini and to keep an eye on the enemy's movements and one of the praetors to Etruria... (ceteris omissis). The Sabine and Etruscan forces who had rallied to the support of Rome, numbered four thousand cavalry and over fifty thousand infantry. After these forces were formed, they were posted in Etruria under the command of a Praetor.*

<sup>8</sup> Theodor Mommsen:

*History of Rome*; published by Aequa, Rome, 1938, volume three, chapter three, paragraph 9: ... "*The Celts found the Apennines weakly defended and they sacked with ease the rich Etruscan plains which had not seen any hostilities for a long time*".

<sup>9</sup> Polybius: work cited, book II, paragraph 23.

After the serious defeat suffered in this war, the Etruscans in Fiesole realised there was no way they could ever resist an attack from the north alone and that, for their future safety, they would have to form an alliance with Rome, which they then did.

A further push towards the formation of this alliance was inspired by the descent of Hannibal. According to Polybius<sup>10</sup> after the Carthaginian crossed the Apennines and

the marshes (perhaps in the valley of the Arno), he set up camp near Fiesole to rest his armies. Therefore, it is highly probable that Fiesole was sacked by Hannibal to supply his army.

Finally, after the second Punic war, Fiesole became an important Roman stronghold guarding against the Apennine Ligurians.

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<sup>10</sup> Polybius: work cited, book III, paragraph 80-82.



## **PART FOUR**

### **A HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION, THE START OF OUR EXPLORATIONS AND OUR FIRST FINDS**





## CHAPTER VIII

### THE START OF OUR EXPLORATIONS, OUR FIRST FINDS AND THE VISIT BY PROFESSOR NEREO ALFIERI

- 1 - Our preliminary historical search for information about the ancient road system between Bologna and Fiesole.**
- 2 - Determination of the area to explore.**
- 3 - The difficulty in finding any clues.**
- 4 - The day of the first find.**
- 5 - The first excavations and the visit by Professor Nereo Alfieri.**
- 6 - Professor Nereo Alfieri's monograph provides good hope.**

#### **1 - Our preliminary historical search for information about the ancient road system between Bologna and Fiesole.**

During the autumn and winter of 1977-78, we set about studying history, paying particular attention to the events that could have influenced the Apennine road system and reading the works by the Latin historians (Polybius, Titus Livius, Strabo, Pliny, etc) to find out if there was any information about the construction of the road. We were delighted when we came across Livy's account, which mentions the construction of a road from Bologna to Arezzo in 187 B.C. by the consul Caius Flaminius<sup>1</sup>. Instead, Strabo's *Geography of Italy* was disappointing. It contradicted Livy and stated that the same consul built a road from Rome to Rimini<sup>2</sup> in the same year.

Strabo's mistake was clear<sup>3</sup>; he attributed to the son, C. Flaminius Nepote, construction of the road carried out in 220 B.C.<sup>4</sup> by the father.

In spite of the utmost care and attention, we have not been able to find any other quote that confirms the construction of this road, nor any information that certifies its existence even in any intermediate location other than the main cities mentioned by Livy.

This transapennine route does not even appear in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*<sup>5</sup>, which only mentions the highly trafficked consular roads used during the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., that is about five hundred years after this road had been built. Therefore, it seems probable that at the time, the road built for military reasons to guard the route across the Apennines was probably no longer used or no longer acknowledged as a consular road and for this reason was not indicated in the historic road map.

We were surprised by the complete silence by historians until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in fact we only found mention of it once, two thousand years later, in the work by the Bolognese historian, Ludovico Savioli<sup>6</sup>. He states that

<sup>1</sup> Titus Livius: work cited, book XXXIX, paragraph 2.

<sup>2</sup> Strabo: work cited, book V, paragraph 11.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo was born in 64 B.C. and Titus Livius in 59 B.C.

<sup>4</sup> We have already mentioned the completion of the Via Flaminia from Rome to Rimini by the consul G. Flaminius in 220 B.C.

<sup>5</sup> The *Tabula Peutingeriana* is a document written on parchment 6.8 metres long, dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. It illustrates the geography, roads, distances and place names of the Roman Empire. It is named after the German humanist, Konrad Peutinger who published it in 1500.

<sup>6</sup> Ludovico Savioli: "Compendio storico preliminare agli Annali bolognesi dell'anno di Roma 363 al 1274", section I, note S and section II, page 59.

the road built by C. Flaminius to Etruria, passed through Brento (a village that still stands on the ridge)<sup>7</sup> and ascended from Bologna to the left of the torrent Savena and continued as far as Pian di Balestra, where our ancestors handed down the memory of a Roman road.

We had finally found confirmation of Livy's account and, above all the first topographical reference that indicated the ridge used by the Romans to cross the Apennines. Unfortunately, Savioli provides this information without referring to any archaeological finds and, therefore, without giving any material proof of the Roman road. His belief was probably based on direct or indirect historical sources unknown to us.

The lack of evidence and the idea that this road had been forgotten for twenty centuries was not very convincing, considering that we had to give credit to oral information that had been handed down over such a long period.

However, Savioli's words dating back to the end of 1700 coincided with the words of our ancestors, and so these words began to take on more credibility.

The abbot, Serafino Calindri, mentions more than once in his detailed historical-geographical work written in 1781<sup>8</sup>, a very ancient road that headed towards Tuscany along this same ridge. However, just like Savioli, he does provide information about finding the remains of the road. We believe that if any remains had been found, he most certainly would have mentioned them, given the accuracy with which he describes

the places he visited in person. He probably just reported the tales of the inhabitants of the villages located along the ridge, such as Brento, Monzuno and Cedrecchia, who all agreed on the ancient age of the route.

Other scholars in 1800<sup>9</sup> and 1900<sup>10</sup> were also convinced that a Roman road was built along the ridge, however without indicating any paving or other artefacts that could back up this idea.

By the end of spring 1978, we had concluded an initial phase of historical research and acquired consistent confirmation regarding the possible existence of a Roman road along the ridge. We had not found any certainties, partly because Livy did not identify the exact route followed by Flaminius and although every historian who had more or less marginally taken an interest in the matter agreed about the existence of the road, none offered any information regarding the discovery of any remains. Therefore, our only certainty was that in 187 B.C. the Romans built a transapennine road from Bologna to Arezzo. This certainty was not to be underestimated because it was the only piece of historical evidence on which to base our research.

However, considering the morphological compatibility of the ridge with the existence of a road, the opinions of historians and popular tradition, we already had enough clues to start our exploration on the ground with relative optimism

<sup>7</sup> We pointed out that Brento has been located on an important road axis to Etruria since very ancient times in chapter VII when discussing the Etruscan route between Felsina and Fiesole. Savioli provides confirmation of the strategic importance of Brento when he mentions that Brento was a city with its own bishop's see (work cited, page 59).

<sup>8</sup> Serafino Calindri: "Dizionario corografico, orittologico, storico, etc. dell'Italia – montagna e collina del territorio Bolognese", Bologna 1781, volume I, page 236-382, volume II, page 285, volume IV, page 138.

<sup>9</sup> G.L. Monti: "De viis publicis ac militaribus romanorum tempore per agrum bononiensem ductis" from the "Giornale Ligustico", 1828, page 651.

<sup>10</sup> Arturo Palmieri: "La montagna Bolognese nel Medio Evo", Bologna, 1929, pages 331-332.

Guido Achille Mansuelli: "La rete stradale e i cippi milliari della regione ottava", extract from *Atti e Memorie della R. Deputazione di storia patria per l'Emilia e la Romagna*, volume VII, 1941-1942, page 41.

This great contemporary historian theorises about the existence in Imperial times of another Roman road that linked up with Etruria through the Reno valley and Collina pass. Nothing could be more probable considering the pre-existence of an important Etruscan route in the same direction and the expansion of the Latin-Roman settlements over the entire Bolognese area, including the valleys that penetrate the Apennines.



## 2 - Determination of the area to explore

The first problem we had to deal with was where to start our explorations. The ridge where the hypothetical Roman road was supposedly built is very long (a mere fifty kilometres on the Bolognese versant) and in theory the remains we were looking for could be anywhere along the ridge. Therefore, we had to restrict our explorations to the area where we were most likely to uncover tangible proof after almost 2,200 years.

Initially we tried to evaluate which environmental situations and which construction specifications of the road could have had a negative influence on the preservation of such ancient artefacts. Our attention turned immediately to the various geological features of the ridge. The initial part (Paderno, Pieve del Pino) features outcrops of scaly clays; the intermediate part features much more solid and consistent soil<sup>11</sup> as far as Monzuno, followed by white limestone as far as Pian di Balestra. From here to the Futa pass, the limestone disappears, replaced by soil that is only compact if it is dry, with frequent outcrops of sandstone<sup>12</sup>. Considering the geological situation of the ridge, it was clear that the soil is so solid in the middle part, that all you have to do to build a road for all seasons is flatten the surface without laying any paving stones. The sandy-gravel bed, and (even more so) the white limestone bed, crumble so easily that with the passage of traffic they compact and become more and more consolidated and flat until they look like a rolled road<sup>13</sup>. At the same time, this fragmentation creates a drainage effect that makes transit easy even when it is raining.

These observations convinced us that from Pieve del Pino to Pian di Balestra (31.5 km) the Roman road must have only been a *glarea* road and therefore impossible for us to identify and date.



Mount Bastione: *the dense and wild woodland that covers the summit of the ridge on mount Bastione at the Futa pass made it particularly difficult to identify the paving. Furthermore, in the summer the continuous canopy of leaves above darkens the undergrowth making it difficult to sight clues.*



Mount Bastione: *during the winter the leaves fall making it easier to observe the ground for up to tens of metres.*

Therefore, we decided not to explore this area, as well as the area from Bologna to Pieve del Pino (but for different reasons). In fact along this stretch, the geology of the ridge very probably required paving: from Bologna to Paderno due to the gradient, and from Paderno to Pieve del Pino due to the scaly clay bed

<sup>11</sup> Formations dating back from the lower Pliocene with large embankments of pebbles and sandstone.

<sup>12</sup> These layers of sandstone are called “macigni” and are part of that sandstone-marl flysch known in geology as *Monghidoro formation*, referable to the Palaeocene-Cretaceous, which dates back to some seventy million years ago.

<sup>13</sup> These roads were common almost everywhere until the advent of asphalt in the 1950's/60's.

which was impossible to travel across even on foot when it rained<sup>14</sup>. However, if any paving had been laid, there was no hope of finding any trace from Bologna to Paderno, due to the obvious and considerable modifications to the urban tissue and road network that have affected a large city such as Bologna. Nor was there any hope of finding any paving from Paderno to Pieve del Pino, due to the progressive upheavals caused by the natural formation of erosion furrows, which has increased over the past years.

Thus having excluded any investigation from Bologna to Pian di Balestra, the exploration area was limited to the 10 kilometres that separate the latter location from the Futa pass. Here we hoped that the geology of the soil had forced the Romans to build a paved road, necessary to guarantee easy transit even in case of rain. This is the most verdant and wildest area of the Apennines, mainly covered by large beech and conifer woods, furrowed by numerous streams of uncontaminated spring water which flow downhill to supply larger rivers such as the Savena<sup>15</sup>. Here and there in small clearings amongst the trees, the ferns grow up to two metres high in their attempt to find the sunbeams that force their way with difficulty through the tree branches. Other plants do not grow in their shade and the soil is covered by a soft mantle consisting in fallen leaves, which no-one moves or treads on.

Until the first decades of 1900, only the woodcutters and the charcoal burners came to these areas, forced by their jobs to live in improvised “huts”, but as soon as they could, they returned home to their houses further down the valley, leaving the woods to the boars, roebuck, foxes and wolves.

Since the fall of the Roman Empire, this area has always been a border area, often hotly contested and thus uninhabited, but a more or less useable road has always passed through it because it was the route across

the Apennines. Therefore, the trace of an ancient mule track has been preserved until the present-day, although the route is often blocked by the growth of all sorts of wild plants and thorns, especially thick along the track, because no one has come this way for over the past fifty years.

### 3 - The difficulty in finding clues

A further three considerations restricted the search between Pian di Balestra and the Futa pass.

a) Because this area has always been uninhabited, it was unlikely that any of the paving stones had been removed. It is well known that during the Middle Ages, even prestigious Roman archaeological remains were pillaged when construction materials were required elsewhere.

b) It was more likely that a paved road in these uninhabited and borderline areas would be Roman, compared to near a town or village where the road could have been built later for local traffic.

c) These areas were so easily reached from our summer homes nearby. The search would have been a way of spending our holidays; pure enjoyment, doubtlessly interesting, but always and anyway enjoyment, which we could pursue in July and August, in fresh woodland at an altitude of 1000 metres and more above sea level.

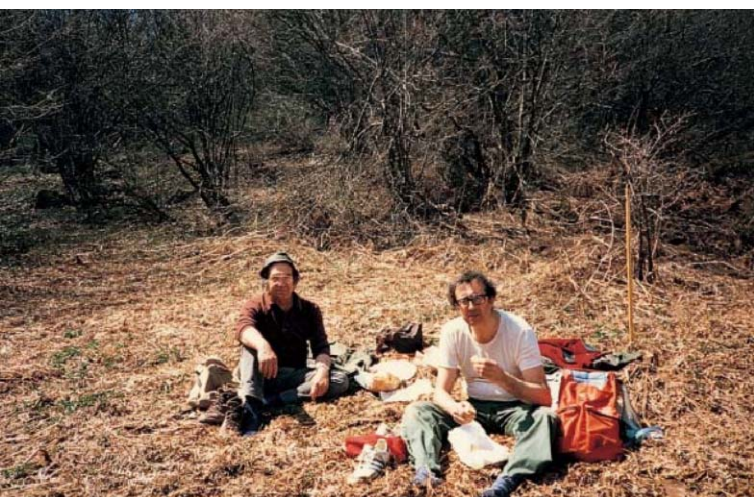
Therefore,, in July 1978, we decided to start our search, which did not consist in a straightforward exploration of the area, but required numerous test digs so see if we could find any remains of paving stones.

Well-aware of the effort that this required, and wanting to reduce the effort as much as possible, even if in a context of

<sup>14</sup> The existence of an ancient paved road along this stretch of the ridge is mentioned by Giannitrapani. In his book, “L’Appennino bolognese, descrizione ed itinerari” published in Bologna in 1881 by the Printers ‘Fava e Garagnani’, by the CAI (Italian Alpine Club), on page 592, when describing a road that links Bologna to Castiglione dei Pepoli he says “*in ancient times, an entirely paved mule-track ascended from Porta Castiglione in Bologna to mount Paderno and Pieve del Pino...*”. We do not want to assume that this paved road is the Roman road, but only highlight how even in the Middle Ages, a “paved” mule-track was indispensable to travel on foot or with pack animals along this stretch of ridge.

<sup>15</sup> The source of the Savena is south of Castel dell’Alpi, created by the convergence of three streams called the “Tre Savanelle”. According to tradition, the river gets its name from these three streams, but its origin is probably different. In fact, we agree with Professor Giancarlo Susini from Bologna University who believes that the names of many torrents and rivers such as Savena, Savio, Sava, etc. come the Celtic root, *sav* (water).





Mount Bastione (1979): *Franco Santi and Cesare Agostini, sitting on a soft bed of dry ferns during a break from their springtime search, before the vegetation started to bud at an altitude of 1000 metres.*

exciting summer entertainment, we were convinced that the belt to explore lay on either side of the top of the ridge, near the still visible traces of that ancient mule-track which went from Pian di Balestra to the Futa pass.

Because numerous holiday homes were built on the ridge at Pian di Balestra during the sixties, we decided to start our ground search three hundred metres further south, near the Tuscany-Emilia border, on the upper slopes of mount Bastione, where the abbot, Serafino Calindri, mentioned the existence of a very ancient road with these words<sup>16</sup>: “... below it (editor's note: that is below the peak of mount Bastione or Balestra), a short distance away, there was a territorial boundary stone, located near a most ancient road that went from Bologna through Monzone and onwards into Tuscany. The road was still used during the summer months by carriers and wayfarers...”.

There are two important details in Calindri's description:

- indication of a “territorial boundary stone” between the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Papal States, just below the peak of mount Bastione;
- the fact that it was *located near* a very ancient road. Considering that Calindri was writing in 1781, the use of the superlative *most*

*ancient* was understood by us as dating back to time immemorial which could coincide with the Roman era; the verb *went* reinforces this concept because he is obviously referring to a road that did not exist any more or which was no longer visible. Therefore, it was not the mule-track used at the time in summer by carriers and wayfarers.

Giving credit to these indications, first we went to look for the boundary stone, which we found easily because it was located along the present-day border between Tuscany and Emilia. The mule-track was equally easy to find, although during the 1950s it was broadened and improved near the boundary stone to allow vehicle access to two nearby farmhouses.

Satisfied that we had identified this first topographic reference, we explored with particular care the slopes of mount Bastione, especially where the slope descends to join the line of the ridge from Bologna to the Futa pass. We hoped to guess where the remains of the paving lay by observing the surface



Mount Bastione, Tuscany-Emilia border: *an original cylindrical sandstone boundary stone, identical to the one found until 1992 on the Tuscany-Emilia border on the slopes of mount Bastione, which Serafino Calindri saw at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, very close to a most ancient road. It was one of the reference points for the start of our search. This particular boundary stone was recently stolen, but other identical stones dated 1789 can still be found along the boundary, the year in which they were installed as testified by the date sculpted on their side.*

<sup>16</sup> Serafino Calindri: work cited, page 236.

of the mountain slope, and thus identify any slightly flat areas measuring at least 2/3 metres wide and which ran parallel to the ridge.

We thought that if the paved road still existed and was hidden below hundreds of years of sedimentation by leaves and earth, it would have affected the shape of the slope, providing a flatter surface that would appear unnatural compared to the uphill and downhill slope. Furthermore, the downhill edge of the paving may still be visible along certain stretches due to scant sedimentation and erosion by rainwater and the wind. With these expectations, we paid particular attention to every stone that emerged from the undergrowth with a certain logical alignment, checking to see whether they could be the tips of the remains we were looking for.

There are sandstone outcrops of varying size scattered throughout the area. The sediments can sometimes lie horizontally forming a broken network that can be deceptive at first sight; furthermore, stones of various sizes have broken off from the sedimentations over the millennia, and because half concealed by the leaves, drew our attention. We also had to consider the possibility that we might uncover an area where the paving had been upset by landslides, which may have caused the stones to roll down the slope, thereby scattering the original compact structure. Therefore, it was important to observe any stones scattered here and there under the leaves carefully, to check whether they held any clues to previous use, such as manmade cuts, rounded edges or one side eroded by traffic and the weather.

Our survey of the surface was relatively easy where the thick beech woods prevented the growth of other plants or shrubs; the eye could sweep over a radius of 30-40 metres looking for clues. More

difficult was the search in the clearings where luxuriant ferns, brambles and every type of weed grew. In these cases, we had to cut back all the vegetation to ensure there was nothing important underneath. Any perception of a clue implied verification, which (at best) consisted in a small dig to check whether the outcropping stone had been carved by man and if there were any other stones aligned with it to form the edge of a road. More tiring was the excavation work in areas where an abnormal gradient made us suspect the existence of a solid horizontal plane; in these cases we tried to dig as far away as possible from the stumps of the beech trees, but in spite of this, we still encountered difficulties due to the presence of a network of roots that spread in every direction. These test excavations were carried out with a robust pick and shovel which we took turns to use, however by evening, the day's toil made itself felt, even if at the time we were respectively only 40 and 45 years old.

#### **4 - The day of the first find**

Summer 1978 ended without us finding any trace of the paved road, although we had explored a good part of the ridge. At the onset of the following spring, we carried out more extensive explorations while the trees were still bare and the dried autumn ferns still crushed against the ground after the winter snow and before new ferns started to shoot.

We hoped the overall panorama the season offered would allow us to gather some sort of clue, but unfortunately we came away empty handed.

We restarted our exploration in July 1979, on the ridge on the upper slopes of mount Bastione<sup>17</sup> which, in spite of being close to the Pian di Balestra holiday village,

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<sup>17</sup> To better understand the terminology we use to describe locations, we have to clarify what we mean by "ridge" or the "road on the slopes" of a specific peak. Our route follows the ridge top exactly, which generally follows a regular, gradually ascending course from Bologna to Poggiaccio, where it starts to descend to the Futa pass. However, not every point of the route along the ridge coincides with the orographic ridge; when encountering unexpected asperities, even the very oldest road system created diversions around these isolated orographic outcrops. These diversions tended to be located on the side of one of the two versants, to avoid any futile ascents and descents needed to maintain the route along the ridge. In other words, the route passes below individual peaks, even if they are relatively high, to ensure continuous progress with the fewest differences in level possible; this is the case on mounts Bastione, Poggiaccio and Poggio Castelluccio.



was not popular with holidaymakers because of the thick vegetation. We preferred to go unnoticed due to a sense of privacy and to avoid having to explain what we were doing with excavation tools in such isolated locations. We also feared being ridiculed by those who did not share our ideas or believed we were looking for other items. Furthermore, news of our search had spread amongst the inhabitants of Castel dell'Alpi and many thought we were wasting our time. Nevertheless, we continued our efforts during the entire summer holidays, exploring the designated area inch by inch and carrying out frequent test digs. Every time our feet felt a stone beneath the leaves or ferns, we uncovered and examined it carefully. If we suspected it was a stone carved by man, we enlarged our excavation to see if there were any other stones.

After many futile excavations, our feet finally knocked against a stone in a clearing concealed by thick ferns. We were just three hundred metres within Tuscany, on the western slopes of mount Bastione, about 70 metres below the peak and about 10 metres above the mule-track, whose route is still visible. Just as we had done before, we cut back the ferns so we could see what we were doing and excavate the stone. The sandstone emerged by just 5-6 cm and appeared to be wedged solidly in the ground. After removing the surrounding soil, with a certain indifference we noticed that downhill it was flanked by soil whereas uphill it lay next to another stone. We continued to excavate uphill and discovered a third stone which was as stable as the other two. At this point, we started to think that we may have found something important, but neither of us dared say anything to this effect, as if to ward off bad luck.

We continued to excavate uphill for about another metre, following the hypothetical width of the road and more sandstone blocks appeared before our eyes. This continuity of perfectly level stones, each fitting next to the other, convinced us that what we had found was man-made paving. But one metre's width was not enough to attribute the paving to the Romans. We had to excavate further until we reached the other edge of the road surface, so we could measure its width. As we gradually proceeded uphill, the soil above the paving



Mount Bastione (25 August 1979): *Franco Santi with our first find, when we had uncovered just 1.20/1.30 metres in width of the paving. Note that the ferns growing around the excavation completely covered the ground.*

became deeper and forced us to remove an increasing amount of material. We abandoned the small hoe we used to make our test digs and took up our pick and shovel which we always had with us. With great vigour, we continued our excavation, making it as narrow as possible in an attempt to discover as soon as possible where the other side of the paving ended. Inwardly we hoped we would not reach the other edge too soon, because the wider the road surface, the more likely it was built by the Romans.

During the Middle Ages, muddy stretches of mule-tracks were paved to ease the transit of people on foot or horseback. But these were always 1.60-1.80 metres wide. However, the Romans never built paved roads measuring less than 2.40 metres wide, not even on high mountain passes.

Aware of these construction features, we continued to excavate, hoping that

we would find more stones, at least up to a width of 2.40 metres. As we proceeded with our excavation, we measured the uncovered width and when we reached 2.40 metres without yet finding the uphill edge we were overcome by a sense of great satisfaction. We no longer felt weary and shortly we had uncovered the entire road width, reaching the uphill edge which set the road surface at 2.50. Overwhelmed by enthusiasm, we extended the excavation along the length of the road, and before the sunset, we had exposed the paving over a length of 1.50 metres and a width of 2.50 metres.

It was late afternoon on 25 August 1979; the most wonderful day of our entire archaeological adventure, because deep down we knew that we had finally found the Roman road remembered by our ancestors.

That evening, we returned home triumphant to celebrate with our families the discovery that they had believed impossible.

## 5 - The first excavations and the visit by Professor Nereo Alfieri

The next day we immediately returned to the site to continue our excavation and unearth further metres of road. The paving was compact and well preserved, made of hewn sandstones, placed one next to the other. The stones on the uphill edge of the road were much wider than those on the downhill edge, because the stones on the downhill edge were laid vertically. The stones in the centre of the road were smaller but perfectly arranged between the two lateral “guides”, which were still intact and without any blurs. We considered ourselves lucky to have found such a well-preserved first stretch of road, which allowed us to observe its structure.

The way in which it was built, its position in relation



Mount Bastione (25 August 1979): Franco Santi and Cesare Agostini on the site of the first find at the end of the day's excavation. Their satisfaction is easy to see from their faces.. (Photograph taken by Andrea Agostini, Cesare Agostini's fourteen-year-old nephew, present at the find).

to the ridge and its direction, convinced us that we had uncovered the Roman road.

After just a few more days' excavation, we had uncovered a stretch about 10 metres long by the entire 2.50 metre width<sup>18</sup>.

Curiosity and eagerness to find confirmation of its continuity convinced us to carry out a further test dig, 70-80 metres further north, along the theoretical direction of the road. After a few unsuccessful digs, we moved slightly further downhill where the slope was flatter. Here we found a stone wider than the ones found on the downhill edge two days earlier. We continued to dig

<sup>18</sup> This stretch of paved road is 2.50 m wide but most of the remaining road uncovered during our search has a constant width of 2.40 metres, equal to about 8 Roman feet (29.7 cm x 8 = 2.376 m). However, we found some stretches with an average width between 2.50 and 2.60 metres. These differences can very probably be attributed to the different state of preservation of the structure: the 2.40 metre wide stretches are as perfectly compact as when they were built, whereas the stones in the 2.50 metre wide stretches may have become loose due to soil subsidence.



along the road axis and uncovered about ten more, which reminded us of the edges (curbstones) of the first Roman consular roads.

In the meantime, two friends, Salvatore Argenziano and Giorgio Brighetti, who we had told about our find, invited Franco Bergonzoni, the then director of the Archiginnasio Library in Bologna and scholar of Roman archaeology<sup>19</sup> to come and have a look at the remains. Franco Bergonzoni thought it appropriate to request the participation of Nereo Alfieri, Professor of Ancient Italian Topography at Bologna University, who accepted the invitation. An urgent inspection was agreed before the end of August. We met on the edge of the carriage road and reached the excavation site through an opening in the dense undergrowth. Once we had reached the site, Bergonzoni and Alfieri carefully observed the stones still dirty with soil and scrutinised the structure of the paving which looked like a surreal painting framed by the dark disturbed soil and the green ferns.

We waited silently, only answering their questions about the history of the place and indications useful for pinpointing the position.

After a polite exchange between Bergonzoni and Alfieri, the latter expressed his doubts. He substantially said that this small stretch of road might perhaps belong to a paved road built by the Romans, but confirmation was needed as to whether it continued as far as the Futa pass (8.5 kilometres further south) before it could be recognised as having a transapennine function compatible with the important Roman road system. If this could not be proved, a road of this type could have been built in more recent times to cover brief distances between a convent and a church, or a small medieval village and a mill, etc.

We immediately excluded the existence of any villages, mills or convents anywhere near the ridge, except for the well-known "Stale" hospice on the Futa pass. We then asked if in his opinion it could be the remains of the road mentioned by Titus Livius,



Mount Bastione (August 1979): a faded image of the inspection at the end of August of the first remains of the paving of the *Flaminia Militare* on mount Bastione; Franco Santi (right) illustrates our opinion to Nereo Alfieri (centre), who listens carefully, while Franco Bergonzoni takes notes.

built by the consul C. Flaminius in 187 B.C. from Bologna to Arezzo.

Alfieri's answer was categorical and absolute: he had already identified that road himself on another ridge, between the river Idice and the Sillaro, and therefore it could not pass where we were on mount Bastione. This affirmation surprised us because we were not aware of the results of his research on the other ridge, and disappointed us because it destroyed the historic foundation on which our research was based.

Alfieri probably realised our feelings from the expression on our faces and felt obliged to repeat his opinion telling us that as little as

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<sup>19</sup> Franco Bergonzoni from Bologna has published numerous studies about Bologna during the Roman age, and takes a special interest in tracing the first urban roads built by the Romans.



three years before, he had published in the “Atti della Accademia delle Scienze dell’Istituto di Bologna” [Acts of the Academy of Science of the Institute of Bologna] the results of his research that identified the route of the road constructed by the consul C. Flaminius from Claterna to the Raticosa pass<sup>20</sup>.

Although we were embarrassed because we had revealed that we had not investigated the opinion of every modern scholar, we enquired about the construction features and the lengths of the Roman road he had found. He then clarified that he had not yet found any road paving, but that he had formulated a hypothesis about the existence of Flaminius’ road, having found persistent use of road names whose origin could be attributed to the name of the consul Flaminius in documents dating from 1100-1200.

These words reassured us, leaving us with hope, because our modest finds had not been completely demolished by the concrete existence of alternative archaeological finds, but only by an argument founded on documents dating back to more than 1300-1500 years ago and open to interpretation. Anyway, due to our lack of knowledge about his writings on the subject and due to an instinctive reverence we did not offer any doubts about Alfieri’s theory although Bergonzoni appeared to express fewer reservations about the Roman origin of the paving before his eyes<sup>21</sup>.

## 6 - Professor Nereo Alfieri’s monograph leaves room for hope.

Although the meeting with Nereo Alfieri had seriously dampened our initial enthusiasm, there was no way we wanted to definitely give up the task.

He had only

seen a few metres of road and therefore, had not been able to acknowledge its continuity and its constant and solid structure. Furthermore he had been taken to an unknown mountain and a wood where it was difficult for him to locate his position and understand the exact direction of the ridge and the road. Added to the fact that he was unaware of the history of the area, he could have easily attributed the road to nearby medieval communities in spite of our reassurances that none existed.

However, it is undeniable that his authority on the subject and especially his affirmation that he had already identified the route of C. Flaminius’ road along another ridge, had spread a shadow of doubt over our first finds. We were curious to read his writings and as soon as we returned to city life after the holidays, we studied them with the utmost attention.

After reading the text, we were filled with cautious optimism. The route theorised by Alfieri was only based on a few road names found in documents from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and later, which were not backed up by any archaeological finds resembling a Roman road network. Furthermore, in a preliminary description of the physical geography of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, Alfieri expressed his doubts about making a morphological identification of the ridge which Flaminius had followed and hoped that: “...*In practice, if it were possible to identify the pass or a stretch of mountain used by the Via Flaminia “Minore”<sup>22</sup>, it is reasonable to suggest that its continuation would follow the initial furrow and spur. In the case of Bologna, this type of search would be vast because two hydro-geographic systems converge near our city: the Reno-Setta to the east and the Savena-Zena-Idice, to the west*”<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Nereo Alfieri: “*Alla ricerca della via Flaminia Minore*”. Extract from the Acts of the Academy of Science of the Institute of Bologna, - moral science class – 70<sup>th</sup> year. Reports, Volume LXIV; 1975-1976 – printed by Compositori, Bologna 1976.

<sup>21</sup> Bergonzoni subsequently sent a written report to the Archaeological Superintendency of Emilia Romagna specifying in the subject: “*Municipality of S. Benedetto Val di Sambro; stretches of road paving perhaps from the Roman age in the mount Bastione area*”.

<sup>22</sup> The name Flaminia “minore” was attributed by Professor Alfieri to the route he hypothesised on the ridge that acts as a watershed between the river Idice and the river Sillaro.

<sup>23</sup> Nereo Alfieri: work cited, page 56.

Thus, a number of possible alternative routes remained open, considering that Alfieri did not absolutely exclude our ridge between the Savena and the Setta. Alternatives and doubts that Alfieri expressed a little further on to conclude his brief geomorphologic description of the Tuscan—Emilian Apennines: “...*The conclusion of this methodologically indispensable examination is not reassuring: without the support of specific sources, the search for the route of the ancient road cannot be taken any further than more or less equivalent theories...*”<sup>24</sup>.

We were relieved to learn

that the substance of Alfieri's text was quite different from the categorical statements made on the day of his inspection on mount Bastione, because it left open the possibility of proving that Flaminius' road was built on our ridge, if we could find its continuation as far as the Apennine pass.

After reading the text, we no longer saw Alfieri as a supporter of a theory that contradicted ours but as a valuable prompter of what we had yet to do.

Therefore, all we had to do was continue our search as far as the Futa pass. And that is exactly how we spent the years to come.

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<sup>24</sup> Nereo Alfieri: work cited, page 57.

